

THE BEGINNING

The boy came out to see them sometimes. He was in luck. They were flying again tonight. He ran up the side of the hill to get a better view.

The two creatures drifted gracefully across the night sky, whirling, twirling, swirling about each other like dancers in the stars. Their long, thin bodies sparkled in the twilight and they twisted about each other as they flew. They flew higher together, propelled through the air on their strong wings. The boy lost sight of them in the dark, but then they dove back below the clouds and swept along the ground. Their wings sent a spirited breeze through his blonde hair as they swept past, rising into the air again where they were silhouetted for a moment against the moon.

He was not supposed to be here. His mother said that they were dangerous. Certainly, nothing else dared to take flight when they were out. Still, the boy was not so sure. He thought they were beautiful.

They called out to each other, with shrieks that cut through the night and raised goose pimples on the boy's arms. He smiled and clapped his hands. Together, they circled once more above him, and then chased each other back to the cliffs in the distance, their cries to each other gradually fading away in the darkness.

The boy waited a long time to see if they would come out again, but they did not.

He did not see another one for almost 87 years.

HERE THERE BE MONSTERS

A LOVE STORY

JODY NOLES WAS PSYCHIC. She could see into the future. Of course, nobody really believed that Jody had second sight or a third eye or a sixth sense or any other number of peculiar talents. They thought that it was all in her head. As, indeed, it was.

Jody lived on the third floor of an old wooden boarding house just outside the Old Quarter near downtown New Bedlam. The rent was cheap and the people in the neighbourhood were friendly. Her sister, Rhonda, said it was a firetrap and that she should move, but Jody disagreed. She had always had a good feeling about the old place.

Jody was 28 years old, with thick dark brown hair that hung to her shoulders, blue grey eyes and a crooked smile. She was cute and funny, but she saw herself as just plain and sensible. She had long legs, which she thought were too short and a trim figure that she thought was too fat. She thought her chest was too small and that her bum was too big when, in fact, all of her parts, taken together, were just about right.

Jody liked to wear jeans or jean skirts or jean shorts most of the time. If T-shirts came in denim, she probably would have worn those, too. She did have a pair of denim socks, which she saved for special occasions.

Jody's grandmother had been psychic, too. The old lady had known when the birds would start calling and what their calls meant. She knew when storms were coming. She knew where the best fruit was to be found. She even made a very tidy living buying and selling penny shares, for with her gift of prophecy; Jody's grandmother never picked losing stocks. Jody remembered how strangers came from far and near to visit with Lulubell Noles in her tiny living room and talk about the future.

People never visited with Jody to talk about the future. For, unlike her grandmother, Jody Noles never foresaw anything useful or profitable. Winning lottery numbers, which road to take home to avoid traffic, whether that nice man she met at the convenience store would actually phone her; these things all eluded her.

Nevertheless, she could foresee all manner of the useless and mundane with uncanny precision. She knew when her best friend Claire started dating that rat Tommy from the delivery company that it would all end in tears; and she was right. She knew that movie Wayne took her to with the bald action star would be terrible and she was right. She could never really enjoy mystery novels, because she always figured out who the killer was 50 pages before the detective did.

Jody Noles was a genius at predicting the predictable. Just once, Jody wanted to foresee something special. Something important. But, in her 28 years on the planet, she never had.

So, when Jody woke up two weeks before Christmas, her heart pounding from a dream of Santa Claus and a monster with yellow eyes, she realized two things.

First, and there was no doubt of any kind about this, Santa Claus was in terrible danger. The face of the monster with gleaming yellow eyes stared at her yet through the fleeting mists of her dream. Though her clairvoyance had never before revealed anything significant to her, this time she felt that things were different.

The second, and most pressing thing that Jody realised was that her house was on fire. She smelled something burning nearby. She kicked off her blankets, but the room was still uncomfortably hot. Then, she heard the crackle of the flames outside her door and saw smoke spilling in underneath it. Choking, she stepped out of bed, picked up her blanket and wrapped it around her. She walked cautiously to the door

and reached for the doorknob. "Ow!" she cried and pulled her hand away. The doorknob was much too hot to touch. She shook her head and muttered, "I never saw this coming."

She struggled to remember what she had been taught about escaping from a burning building. She wished she had paid more attention in school. She was sure that a fireman came to her class one day and talked about fire safety. She thought there might even have been a movie about it. She remembered that she thought the fireman was incredibly good looking. In fact, that was all that she remembered about the fire safety class. No matter how hard she tried to remember what to do next, nothing came to her.

There was a loud crash as a window on the second floor exploded outwards. Jody jumped. "Enough daydreaming," she thought. "I have to get out of here. She picked her blanket off the floor and wrapped it around the doorknob. She turned it slowly until the door came ajar. Then, she pressed her hand against the door to push it open. The heat burned her palm and she pulled her hand away. She leaned against the door and pushed it open with her shoulder instead.

A wall of smoke and fire burst through the open door. Jody was thrown back across the room as the flames licked their way towards her across her bedroom carpet. Black smoke curled up to the ceiling and pressed down upon her. The heat was unbearable. Tears spilled down Jody's cheeks. She concentrated, straining to foresee what she should or would do next. Again, nothing came. As usual, when it mattered most, her gift failed her.

She crawled to the window and looked down at the dark lawn three stories below. She sighed. Then she coughed. There was no other way out. She cranked the window open and the cool evening air swirled into the room. For a moment, Jody could breathe again. But the fresh air also fuelled the fire, which now boiled at her with increased ferocity.

She had no choice; she was going to have to jump. She pulled out the window screen and climbed up on to the sill. "This is really going to hurt," she gasped. She closed her eyes and stepped out into the night.

She landed in a thick shrub at the edge of her garden. It did not hurt a bit.

"Figures," said Jody.

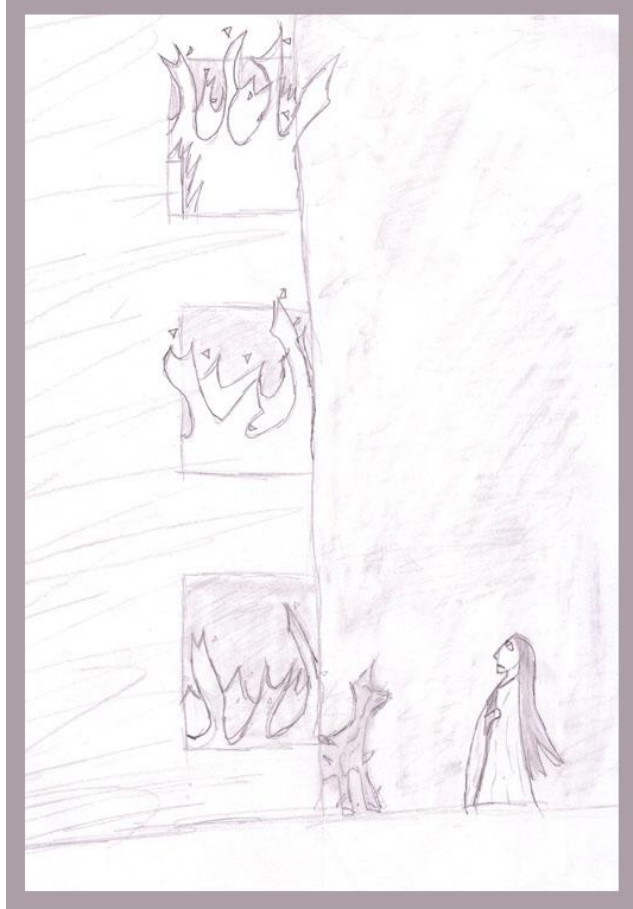
She tumbled out of the bush and looked up at the smoke spilling out of her bedroom window. In the distance, she could hear a siren wailing,

slowly getting louder as it grew closer. She walked unsteadily to the front yard. A loud crash reverberated from inside the house.

“That will be the refrigerator,” thought Jody. “I should have known better than to buy groceries this morning.” She walked to the house next door and rang the bell. An older woman with purple hair answered the door.

“Oh Jody,” I am so happy to see you. Frank called the fire department.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Steamboat,” said Jody, stepping into the doorway and looking around. “Do you have a pen and paper handy?”



Mrs. Steamboat blinked at Jody, who stood in her hallway wrapped in a blanket covered with leaves and branches, her hair tangled and her face streaked with black marks. “Excuse me?” she said.

“A pen and paper,” repeated Jody. “I have to write a letter.”



TIG NEVER MEANT TO MAKE THE GREATEST archaeological find in history. He only wanted to dig up some potatoes. He had been putting it off for weeks, but here it was, nearly Christmas and the potatoes were still growing. It was becoming a bit of an embarrassment and he had to do something about it. So, he put on his Wellingtons¹ and collected his

¹ The Wellington boot is better known as a gumboot or, sometimes, as a wellie. These functional rubber boots are named after Arthur Wellesley, the First Duke of Wellington and the English general who defeated Napoleon at Waterloo. The Duke’s pioneering boot-ware were originally made of calfskin and were designed

shovel. He waded out into his muddy backyard garden and began the tedious chore of digging them up. The first two potatoes he uncovered were each as big as his head and were wrapped in a tangled web of green eyes. He despaired at what else he might find.

Stig was a stocky dark haired, dark eyed man in his early thirties. His hair tended to poke in a variety of directions, no matter which way he combed it or how much he moussed it. His mother might have called him handsome. Probably nobody else would. He was a little heavier than he should have been, a little shorter than he wanted to be, and not quite as clever as he could have been. His real name was Stigwurst, which was not only the name of a popular type of sausage; it was also the name of the popular nightclub in downtown New Bedlam where Stig's mother had met Stig's father. Stig came into the world barely nine months later.

Stig lived alone on a street at the edge of New Bedlam in a little house with a big yard. Stig did not much care for mowing the lawn, so he had planted a ton of potatoes instead. They grew without any particular work on his part, until now, when it was time to dig them out. He dug up another basketball of a spud and tossed it into the little pile he had accumulated. He stabbed his shovel back into the dark ground and struck something.

Stig realised at once that this was no potato, but that left a great many other possibilities about what it could be. It was hard and white and round and seemed to extend some distance under the ground. It looked like it might be a tree root or an underground pipe. Curious, he dug a little further.

Stig had completely lost interest in digging up potatoes. His attention span was like that: short and easily diverted. Even though he had potatoes that needed digging, he had now unearthed something entirely different and that had become, for the moment, the most important thing in the world to him.

He knew that in a few minutes he would probably be onto something else, but for the time being, he was determined to uncover the strange

to be hardy in battle, yet fashionable enough for evening wear. The Duke wore his wellies on the fields of Waterloo and later, when he was received in triumph at Buckingham Palace. Soon, all of the aristocracy was wearing them. In the 1850's, rubber boots were *haute couture*.

I bet that you did not know that.

object. He wondered what it was. He had ruled out potato, turnip and giant parsnip fairly quickly, but that left uncounted possibilities remaining. Pirate treasure figured prominently among these possibilities in Stig's mind, but as Stig exposed more and more of the mysterious object, that possibility became increasingly less likely. Still, he remained intrigued.

Stig's pale arms glistened with sweat as he turned over sod after sod. Three hours passed before he reached the end of the thing. By then, he had dug a twelve foot long trench across his backyard. The long white object, which was not a potato, a turnip, a parsnip, a root, a water line, a flagpole, a fallen tree, a gas pipe, or pirate treasure lay along the bottom. Now that Stig had exposed the end, he could see what it was at last.

It was a bone.

But, not just any ordinary bone. It was the leg bone of something enormous. Stig had no idea what kind of animal had a leg bone like this. He just hoped that there was not another one nearby.

JODY HAD NOT WRITTEN A LETTER to Santa since she was nine. In the nearly twenty Christmases since then, she had always been surprised by what was under the tree. But this time, Jody was not providing Santa with a list of toys or clothes or games that she wanted for Christmas. This letter was a warning.

Jody sat at the table in her sister's kitchen, with a pad of coloured paper in front of her. Each sheet was decorated with unicorns and butterflies. It was the sort of stationary Jody liked.

Jody's sister, Rhonda, snorted when she saw Jody's pad, but then Rhonda generally disapproved of just about everything that Jody did. And on this December afternoon, Rhonda felt that Jody really had much better things to do than to write letters to Santa Claus. Like find another place to live.

Rhonda was a few years older than Jody and lived in a new house at the eastern edge of New Bedlam with her husband Les and her three kids, Ronnie, Donnie and Little Jack. Rhonda adored her family. She saw her husband as a dream with a hairy back and her children as the ultimate achievements in human evolution.



Conversely, Jody thought that Les, who more than once had made a drunken pass at her, was a jerk; and that Rhonda's three kids were horrific brats. These opinions were widely shared throughout Rhonda's neighbourhood. But, after the fire destroyed her home, Jody had nowhere else to go.

"Besides," said Jody. "I have a good feeling that this is the right place for me to be right now."

"Oh, not this again," moaned Rhonda.

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Jody.

"Jody, you always have good feelings about things," said Rhonda, making quotation marks with her fingers as she said the word *feelings*. "But you're not psychic."

"Yes, I am," Jody shot back defensively.

"No, you're not. And your *feelings* never mean anything," Rhonda replied, once again making a quotation mark gesture with her fingers.

"Yes they do," said Jody. She was about to share with Rhonda some of her feelings about Les, but she thought better of it. Among Jody's *feelings* about Les was that with the way he drove his pickup truck and with the way that he drank most nights, she was unlikely to be bothered by him much longer. Rhonda, of course, would not want to hear anything about that.

Just then, Little Jack came tearing through the kitchen on his skateboard. Little Jack was not really that little; though he was a *little* tall for his age and a *little* fat for any age. He wore a hooded sweatshirt and a loose pair of blue jeans that seemed to be buttoned up somewhere around the middle of his thighs. A pair of stained plaid boxer shorts was visible above his belt. He held a red plastic bottle in one hand and squirted great globs of ketchup from it over his shoulders at his two brothers. Ronnie and Donnie, the twins, were likewise tall and, as Rhonda put it, 'big boned'. They ducked under Little Jack's ketchup burst and returned fire. A blob of mustard splashed on Jody's cheek.

Rhonda smiled with unshakeable maternal devotion. In her mind, no matter how many things they broke, animals they tortured, or fires they set, her boys could do no wrong. "Doesn't it just warm your heart to see them playing together like that?" she asked Jody.

Jody strained to keep from rolling her eyes, to the point that she thought she might have pulled a muscle somewhere inside her head. But she just smiled back and said, "boys will be boys, I guess." She wiped the mustard from her cheek.

The three boys stampeded into the living room, surrounded by a cloud of flying condiments. Rhonda scampered after them, picking up the furniture that had fallen in their wake and scooping ketchup off the carpet. Jody turned back to her letter.

Dear Santa, she wrote. I am 28 years old and I have been a very good girl this year. Jody paused. She had not been particularly good that year, but neither had she been particularly bad. Jody simply did not know how else to begin a letter to Santa. Thank you for the new pressure cooker you brought last year. I have not used it yet, but I am sure that I will get around to it really soon. Jody reasoned that it was always a good idea to show a little gratitude. And she really did mean to get around to trying that pressure cooker. She just did not know when she ever would. She chewed on the end of her pencil and then continued. I hope that you are well. Did you have a nice summer? How is Mrs. Claus?

"Enough chit-chat," thought Jody. "Time to get to it." She bent closer to the page and wrote, *I am sorry to have to tell you this, but you must not come to New Bedlam this year. It is very dangerous.*

Jody paused as she recalled her dream. It had been so real, like she was actually there. She was sitting in a field looking up at the frozen winter night sky. Stars sparkled and the occasional snowflake drifted down. It felt like Christmas Eve.

Something was moving. At first she thought it was a falling star, but then she saw it was some sort of flying sled, coming closer. Who else on Christmas Eve but Santa Claus? The sled danced along the cliffs that rose up along the edge of New Bedlam. It turned and descended towards her. Then, disaster.

A great monster with leathery wings swooped from below and glided alongside the little sled. Its yellow eyes glowed through the clouds of smoke or steam that surrounded it. Then it struck. The sled tumbled from the sky, the monster close behind.

Jody did not know what happened next, because at just that moment she had learned that her house was on fire. The last thing she saw before she woke was the sled, falling, and the monster's yellow eyes. But she knew for certain that Santa Claus could not come to New Bedlam that year.

There is a monster here, with yellow eyes and wings and a tail. I don't know what it is, but I would hate for you to be eaten, or worse. I know that all of the children will miss you, and I will too, but please, please, please, please, please don't come.

I guess you should know that I am a psychic, just like my grandmother LuluBell Noles, and that I saw all of this in a dream. I would never tell you to stay away unless it was really, really important.

"That should do it," said Jody as she read over her letter. She scratched out a couple of more lines. *That is all for now. The weather has been really nice this winter. I hope that you will be able to make it out next year.*

Yours very truly,

Jody P. Noles

Jody debated whether to say anything else and finally added a postscript, *P.S. The new sleigh looks terrific. But what happened to the reindeer?*

She heard a rattling noise and turned around. An incredibly old man in a walker was standing behind her looking over her shoulder.

"Wassat yer writin'?" asked the old man.

"Oh, it's just a letter, Grampa Les," replied Jody.

Grampa Les was Les' grandfather or great grandfather or maybe even his great great grandfather. It had never been clear to Jody just how he was related. If the truth were told, it was probably was not clear to Grampa Les either.

Like Jody, Grampa Les lived in Rhonda's house. About ten years earlier, Les and Rhonda had invited Grampa Les to come live with them. They assured him that he would be much more comfortable there than in some horrible old folks home. Of course, they expected it would only be a little while before the old man died and repaid their hospitality in his will. They set him up with a cot and a little chest of drawers in their laundry room, promising to move him into a bigger room, "really really soon."

Now, ten years later, Grampa Les was still in the laundry room and stubbornly continued not only living, but also spending what little money he had left, while at the same time consuming a surprising amount of

prunes, bran and marmalade. For Les and Rhonda, the whole business had turned into an unexpectedly poor investment.

Grampa Les was a tall wrinkled man with long skinny arms and long skinny legs. He looked like he was at least a hundred years old. The only hair on his head was a pair of extremely bushy eyebrows and the wiry clumps that grew out of his ears and nose. Liver spots dotted his hands, arms and other places best left unseen. The rest of his skin was a grey-yellow colour that Jody had never seen anywhere and which seemed to exist nowhere else on the spectrum. She privately referred to this otherwise unknown hue as 'grelow'.

"Whosit you writin' it to?" snapped Grampa Les.

Jody looked away and blushed a little before answering, "Santa Claus."

Grampa Les' eyes opened wide. "L'il late to be writin' to Santa, ain't it?" he asked.

"Oh, I hope not," said Jody. She folded the coloured paper and slipped it into a matching envelope with unicorns and butterflies on it. "Say, do you have any stamps?" she asked.

There were a number of uncomfortable sounding creaks and cracks as Grampa Les shook his head. Jody looked around the kitchen for a few minutes and then said, "Oh, I'll just go out and get one," she stood on her toes and kissed Grampa Les on his wrinkled grellow forehead.

"Bye, Grampa Les," she said. "I'll be back soon." She grabbed her jacket and hopped down the front steps. Grampa Les shambled to the door to see her off.

"Sweet kid," he muttered. "Nuttier 'an a peanut butter factory, though."

Jody decided to see if one of Rhonda's neighbours had a stamp. It would not hurt to ask. And you never know when you might meet someone new who could change your life.

THAT WAS THE MOST IMPORTANT MEETING of Jody's life, but, naturally, she did not realize this until much later.

The young woman on Stig's doorstep was dressed in jeans and a yellow T-shirt that said "I ♥ Π", but the first thing that he noticed when he answered the door was a pair of sparkling eyes. He thought they might be blue, or maybe grey. Sometimes it is hard to tell. Below them was a wrinkled nose and a crooked smile, all bounded by a heap of wavy dark brown hair that fell across the side of her face.

The young woman extended her hand. "Hi, I'm Jody, I'm staying next door," she said. Stig took her soft hand and shook it, before he realised that his own hand was still caked with dirt from his yard. He pulled it back quickly.

"I was wondering if you could lend me a stamp." Jody waved her unicorn envelope. "I have a letter to mail."

"Um, sure," said Stig, wiping his hands on his pants. Since they were also covered in mud, this only served to make things worse. He backed into his kitchen, still looking at Jody. "Come on in," he said.

He bumped into a drawer. He turned around and pulled it open. He rooted around it for a few moments then lifted up a block of four stamps. He turned and passed them to Jody. "Will these do?" he asked.

Jody carefully tore one stamp out and returned the rest of the sheet to Stig. "I only need one," she said. She licked the back of the stamp with her pointed pink tongue and pressed it onto the corner of the envelope. She looked up at Stig. "Well, I guess I'm off to the mailbox then," she said. "Thanks a million." She waved the envelope again and turned to leave.

As she reached the door, she stopped. "Say, can you tell me where the nearest mailbox is? I'm kind of new around here."

Stig stumbled forward and blurted out, "sure it's just down this road." He gestured at the street that ran in front of his house. "You turn left at that corner and head up Eastside View and then you take the next left onto Eastside Heights. Then the quickest way is to cut across the alley at Eastside Close and get onto Eastside Boulevard. Then you ..."

Jody nodded, but it was obvious that she was getting lost just *listening* to Stig's directions. "Oh forget it, how about I just show you?" he asked.

“Oh, no,” said Jody, “I don’t want to be any more trouble.”

“It’s no trouble,” said Stig and he stepped out onto the front step beside her. “My name’s Stig, by the way,” and he once again held out his dirty hand. Jody shook it again. The mud did not seem to bother her.

They walked together across Stig’s front lawn and out onto the sidewalk. Neither of them said anything for a few minutes and then Jody spoke. “Stig – that’s an unusual name. It sounds like some kind of punk rocker. I’m surprised you aren’t covered in tattoos.”

Stig laughed. “I’d like to get a tattoo,” he said. “If only because my mother would hate it. But I think I’m almost as scared of tattoo needles as I am of my Mom, so I never have.” Stig’s face went pale. He could not believe that he had just told this pretty stranger that he was afraid of his mother. He thought that he might faint. He quickly asked, “besides, what kind of tattoo would I get?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Jody. “Maybe a sailboat, or a tiger, or an anchor with ‘Mother’ written underneath in flowery letters. Or a girl’s name,” she added slyly.

Stig laughed at that. “I can’t think of any girl who would want her name on my bicep.”

Jody smiled a little bit at that remark. The conversation lapsed into silence and then started to edge into the territory that some people would call awkward, when Stig blurted out, “so ... what ... what do you do?” asked Stig.

“I work at Walmans, ambushing unsuspecting customers with perfume,” said Jody. Walmans was a big department store filled with kiosks that sold make-up and fragrances. Stig looked at her strangely. Jody explained that she spent her working days sitting on a tall chair, spraying perfume on little cards and passing them out to people. “How about you?”

“I hardly work at all,” replied Stig. “I mean I have a job and everything. I’m the assistant manager at Steamboat Records, on Willow Street. Don’t get me wrong, the owner, Frank, is a great old guy, but he’s kind of old fashioned. Who buys records anymore? Nobody. I keep trying to get him to sell CDs or DVDs or things that people actually want, but he won’t hear of it. Most of the time I just rearrange the Elvis or Sinatra displays.”

They reached the corner and turned left. As they walked down the street, their conversation turned to radio shows, game shows, cartoons (briefly), before segueing into a discussion about birds, bird nests, trees, rain forests, tropical fish, pet stores, traffic, and finally new cars. By this time, the letter had been posted and Jody and Stig found themselves back at his front door.

“Well, good-bye, I guess,” said Jody. “Thanks for the stamp. Maybe I’ll see you around.” She took a step down the front stairs.

“Wait,” said Stig. He had no idea what to say. Then he stammered, “I’ve got something I want you to see.”

Stig took Jody around to the back and showed her his bone. It was the biggest one that Jody had ever seen. They were standing at Stig’s back door, looking out over the ditch he had dug in his backyard, the great white bone sparkling in the late afternoon sun.


“What is it?” asked Jody.

“Who knows?” answered Stig. “It must be some kind of a dinosaur or something. I have no idea what to do with it.”

“You should call the museum,” said Jody.

Stig thought about that for a moment. “Do you really think so?”

“Oh yes,” said Jody. “I have a very good feeling about it.”

TIG STARED AT THE PHONE UNTIL HIS FOREHEAD HURT. He was willing it to ring. He had been willing it to ring for three quarters of an hour, but without any success at all.

He had spent the 45 minutes before that willing his arm to reach out to the phone and dial Jody’s number. He had been thinking about her almost constantly since she had turned up on his doorstep the day before. He thought it might be nice to invite her out to do ... something. Anything. He would figure that out once he got up the nerve to actually phone her. But, since his nerve had failed him completely, he had taken to staring at the phone and summoning whatever mental powers he had to make Jody phone him.

He frowned. Clearly, whatever mental powers he had did not include teletelephoneisis.² He decided to try gathering up the nerve one more time to phone her. He sucked in a deep breath and squeezed his eyes shut. He concentrated every ounce of his will on dialling the telephone. He spent several minutes at this and then he felt his hand move. He opened one eye to confirm its progress. Yes, it had definitely moved. In fact, it was actually reaching for the phone. It was working! He was almost there. His hand rested on the receiver. His fingers wrapped around it and prepared to lift it off the cradle.

Then the telephone rang.

Stig screamed and somersaulted backwards out of his chair. He scrambled back to his feet, his heart pounding and grabbed at the receiver. He knocked it from the cradle and it fell to the ground, tumbling noisily across the floor.

He dove after it, scooping it up with his hand while sliding across his hardwood kitchen floor. He pulled the receiver to his face, just as his knee cracked into the corner of the refrigerator.

“Ow!” he shouted into the mouthpiece.

There was a long pause on the other end. “Um hello?” said Stig, as he rubbed his knee with his free hand.

“Hello Stig,” said a deep voice at the other end. Stig sighed. It was his mother. They embarked on their usual telephone conversation: The dialogue at one end of the telephone involved a series of inquiries about the quantity of Stig’s vegetable intake, the amount of sun he was or was not getting, and just what he was doing with his life, anyway. The dialogue at Stig’s end mostly consisted of phrases like “yes, Mother; no Mother and I really don’t know, Mother.”

He finally brought the painful telephone conversation to an end and returned the receiver to the cradle. He limped back to his chair, rubbing his knee as he walked.

The telephone rang again. Stig rolled his eyes. It was just like his Mother to phone him right back with some final rebuke that she had forgotten the first time.

² If telekenisis is the power to move objects with one’s mind, then it follows that teletelephoneisis is the power to use one’s mind to make a telephone do ... something. Anything. Sadly, Stig was not teletelephonetic.

He ripped the receiver from the cradle and barked, “Yes? What is it now?”

There was a long pause on the other end. “Um hello?” said a soft voice. “It’s Jody from next door. Is that you Stig? It’s the strangest thing; I’ve had this feeling that I should call you all afternoon.”

Stig’s forehead was hurting again, but this time it was from banging it against the wall.

“Yes, it’s me,” he mumbled. “Sorry about that, I thought you were a ... um ... a telephone solicitor. They won’t leave me alone until I do something about my ... my ducts.”

“Your ducts?” asked Jody quizzically. “You have ducts?”

“My air ducts, I mean. But never mind about that,” said Stig. He drew a deep breath and blurted out, “Do you want to go to a show or something?”

There was another pause. “Well, I was just calling to see if you had talked to the museum yet. I really do think it would be a good idea,” said Jody. There was another pause. “But a show or something would be great.”

Stig pumped his fist in the air, happily, but accidentally punched the ceiling fan.

“Ow!” he shouted into the receiver.

“Did you say ‘now’? Sure, I guess that right now would be fine,” said Jody. “Come on over. And Stig, you don’t have to shout.”

IN RETROSPECT, IT MIGHT NOT HAVE BEEN a good idea to call the museum. Now Stig’s backyard was a giant hole in the ground with scholarly looking men and women climbing in and out, taking pictures and comparing notes.

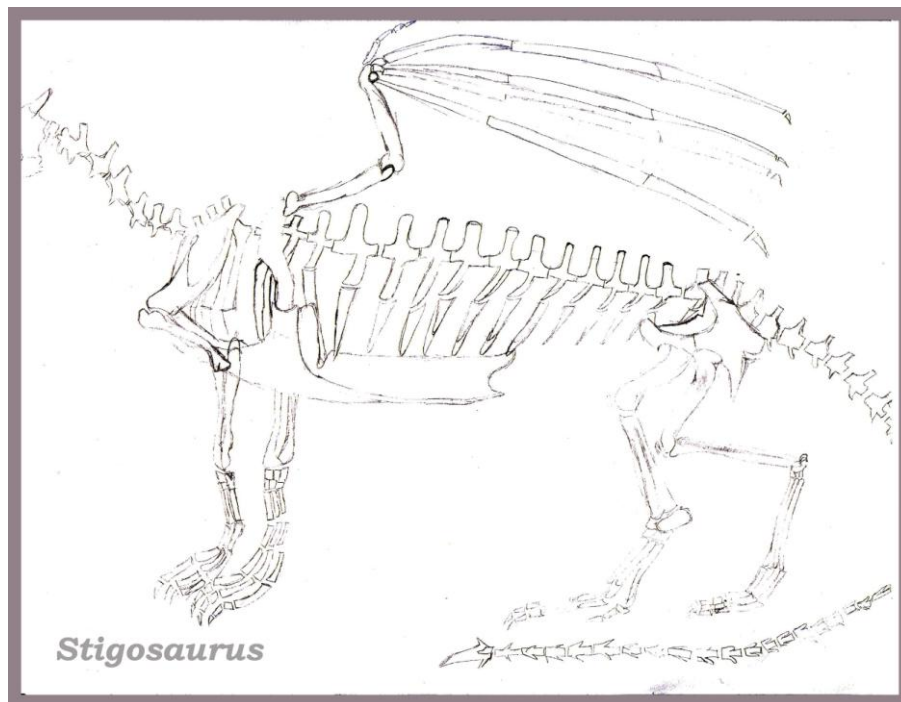
It had only taken three days for the team of scientists from the New Bedlam Museum of Natural History and Collectible Pins and Buttons to expose the complete skeleton, which pretty much filled the entire backyard. They had also dug up all of Stig’s potatoes, which Stig figured

was only small compensation for the mess they had made. A deep pile of dirt lay heaped against Stig's kitchen windows, near where the skeletal creature's perfectly preserved left foot lay.

For days, Stig had wondered what sort of animal lay buried in his backyard. It was unlike anything he had ever seen before. The skeleton lay curled up across the remains of his backyard, like it was sleeping. It was nearly 80 feet long from its pointed snout to its pointed tail. It had huge rear legs, smaller front legs and what might have been wings growing out of its back.

Stig was sure it was some breed of dinosaur, which had not been found before. He had studied every dinosaur website he could find and none of them had anything like this.

Stig had even coined a name for the creature: *Stigasaurus*. He liked the sound of that. He wondered to himself how much he would be able to charge for people to come and see it. And for the T-Shirts they might buy.



Stig was standing with Jody on the only corner of his deck that was not covered in dirt. They were watching the museum workers digging up the few remaining patches of Stig's yard. Since they had spoken on the telephone, Stig had found himself standing around with Jody at all sorts of places. They stood around together at the mall, they stood around together at the Caffeine Café, and they were standing around together

now. Things had reached the stage where soon, Stig hoped, they might even start sitting around together.

Stig looked down at Jody's hand. He wanted to take it in his and hold it, but was having a little trouble getting up the nerve. He wondered what she would say if he did. He lifted his index finger and pointed it at Jody's hand. Jody was looking at the workers excavating Stig's backyard and did not notice how Stig's finger was now slowly moving, leading the rest of his fingers towards her. Stig could feel a cold line of sweat trickling down his forehead. He dared not pull his hand back to wipe it away, not now when he was so close to Jody's thumb. He was focussing on that thumb now, oblivious to all of the museum workers and the trickle of sweat that was on a collision course with his eye. It was a fine thumb, he thought. Maybe even a perfect thumb. And the fingers beside it, long and delicate, they might even be perfect, too. And now, they were almost within reach. He could almost feel the little hairs on her wrist. Another few seconds and he would be there ...

"Stig!" a voice called from out of the hole. Stig jerked his hand back. At that moment, the little bead of sweat dropped into his eye. Stig flinched and started rubbing his eye furiously with the back of his hand. The same hand which only a moment ago had almost touched a perfect wrist.

"Ow!" cried Stig. Jody looked at him, crouched over with his hand buried in his eye and started laughing.

"Stig!" the voice called again and a short man with neatly trimmed dark hair and enormous glasses with thick lenses climbed out of the hole and stepped onto the deck. It was the museum's Curator, Dieter von Driebarph, PhD., D.A.S.³, S.T.D.⁴ He held a bone the size and shape of a baseball bat in his hand. He looked very excited.

Stig was still blinking when Dr. von Driebarph reached them. "Well, Doc, what sort of dinosaur have we got here? Something new I bet." He rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

The Curator grinned and nodded his head. "Oh yes Stig. It is definitely something new. But it is not a dinosaur," Dr. von Driebarph said in his lilting Irish brogue.

³ Doctor of Applied Science.

⁴ Doctor of Sacred Theology. Bet you were thinking it meant something else, weren't you?

Stig's face fell. "What do you mean it's not a dinosaur?" He waved his arm at his backyard hole. "It has to be a dinosaur. It's *Stigasaurus*. I mean, just look at the size of those fossils."

The short dark haired man looked at Stig the same way he might have looked at a family pet that had left something on the living room carpet. Stig was sure he was about to say "bad dog," but instead, Dr. von Driearph asked, "do you know what fossils are, Stig?"

"Sure," replied Stig. "They are bones that are like a hundred million years old." Jody nodded.

Dr. von Driearph smiled a patient smile. "No Stig, fossils are not bones. Fossils are millions and millions of years old. Despite what you might have learned from watching television, nothing lasts for a million years. Not soda bottles or Styrofoam cups or even bones. The only thing that lasts for a million years or more is this," the Curator picked up a gray rock from one of the many piles of soil that ringed Stig's backyard. "Only stone can last for so long. And this is what fossils are: stone."

"But they look just like bones," said Stig.

"Ah," continued Dr. von Driearph. "Fossils look like bones and that is why they are interesting. But they are not bones. They are rocks. This is how it works. In ancient times, if some animal died, sometimes its bones were buried in dirt or mud. Then that dirt or mud would harden into stone, preserving the bones inside. Even then, the bones slowly rot away in time. Over the centuries, the bones disintegrate and are replaced by other mud and dirt. And that mud and dirt hardens into rock that has the size, shape and features of the original bones. So, after a few million years, all that is left of the original bones is a rock that looks just like them."

The Curator held up the bat sized bone. "This is a bone, son, not a fossil. It has not been here for a hundred million years, or a million years. I doubt it has even been here for a hundred years. Whatever left these bones behind died on this spot sometime in the last century."

"So, it's not a dinosaur?" asked Stig.

"I'm afraid not Stig," replied Dr. von Driearph.

"So, you guys dug up my backyard for nothing." Stig's dreams of licensing his discovery were already beginning to fossilize in his mind.



“Oh my goodness no,” said Dr. von Driebarph. “This is far more interesting and important than a collection of moldy old dinosaur bones. Or fossils, I should say. Even though these are not dinosaur remains, they are the remains of something. Something gigantic. Something magnificent. A creature nobody has ever seen before. And whatever it was, it died on this very spot and left these bones here. And since it died so recently, there might be another one of these ... amazing ... somethings ... out there.

And since it lived and died right here,” Dr von Driebarph gestured to the hole that was once Stig’s backyard, “that other ... amazing ... something might be very close by.”



THE SCOOTER ASSEMBLY LINE WAS ONE OF OVER 500 different assembly lines in the factory. Along each line little men dressed in green and red were rapidly putting together toys. Christmas was just a few days away and there was still a lot of work to be done. Iggy, Yugo and Sam were seated along the line assembling scooters when the announcement came.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam were Christmas elves, who spent their days, and in December when things got really busy, most nights⁵, making toys. Iggy was skinny and tall, for an elf. He had messy black hair and a long face, which dimpled when he smiled, which was most of the time. Yugo was a sturdy elf with a thick black moustache and twinkling eyes. He was a clever elf with nimble fingers who was always creating something new. He had invented almost all of the most popular toys in the world and a great many other things as well.⁶ Sam had curly brown hair, a pudgy nose, pudgy hands and a pudgy body. He was the heaviest of the three.

⁵ Of course, at the North Pole in December there is really only one night and it lasts from October until some time in early March. It would be more correct here to say that ‘... the one night in December when things got really busy ...’ but then there would still have to be some sort of explanatory footnote at the bottom of this page to clarify that what the sentence is really getting at is that the one night in December at the North Pole actually lasts for several days (of which, of course, there are none, not in December anyway) and that all of them (none of them) are pretty busy come Christmastime.

⁶ Among Yugo’s more celebrated inventions are the self-buttering toaster, the self-recycling soda can and the self-cleaning toilet seat for men. He also invented the most remarkable snowmobile in the world, about which more will be heard of later. Now get back to the story and stop reading footnotes.

In fact, he was heavier than the other two put together. He blamed his weight on a “sluggish metabolism,” though it is at least as likely that the sheer quantity of food he consumed had something to do with it.

Sam was tightening rear wheels with his thick fingers while Iggy straightened out the handlebars. Yugo was delicately inserting a small and intricate device near the front wheel.

Sam stopped in mid-tighten. “What are you doing?” he asked.

Iggy paused in mid-straighten and looked down at Yugo. “What is that thing?” he asked.

Yugo broke off in mid-delicate insertion. “What, this thing?” he replied. He held up the small and intricate device in his fingers.

“Yes,” said Sam, “that thing. What is it?”

“Just a variable reiterating control module,” explained Yugo and returned to his delicate inserting.

“Oh,” said Iggy and returned to his straightening. Sam nodded and began re-tightening. Then he set down his wrench.

“Wait a minute,” he said. “Just what is a vacancy rebounding compact model?”

“A variable reiterating control module,” corrected Yugo.

“Yes, fine, whatever,” grumbled Sam. “But what is it?”

“Oh, it’s just a device,” said Yugo vaguely.

“What is it for?” asked Iggy, who by now had completed straightening the handlebar and was waiting for the next scooter to scoot down the line.

“Well,” said Yugo, “it is sort of a new safety thing I came up with. It, you know, is for safety.”

Sam finished tightening the rear wheel. He glared at Yugo. “What does it do?”

Yugo looked away and whispered, “it’s just, ah, it just helps prevent accidents. It just, kind of, keeps the scooter rolling along safely, in case of, you see, sort of, problems.”



Iggy nodded. “What kind of problems?” he asked.

“Oh all sorts of things,” said Yugo, smiling.

“What sorts of things?” pressed Sam.

“Well, if you really must know,” sighed Yugo, “it keeps the scooter going in case the handlebar is not quite straight,” he paused and looked away from Iggy, then tried not to look at Sam as he added, “or in case, just in case mind you, the wheels fall off.”

Sam looked at the wheels he had just attached, raised his wrench slowly and stepped towards Yugo. “Why I ought to ...”

But fortunately for Yugo, that was when the announcement came. The black speakers at the top of the workshop walls squealed for a moment and then a husky voice spoke. “Iggy, Yugo and Sam. Please report to Mr. Claus’ office. Immediately.” There was a low whistle and then the speakers continued playing the usual mix of Christmas carols and soft rock.

“That doesn’t sound good,” said Yugo.

Iggy was, as usual, a little more hopeful. “I don’t know. It could be the beginning of a grand adventure.” He climbed down from his stool and started making his way towards the workshop doors. Yugo and Sam followed behind him.

“Whatever it is, I hope it doesn’t take too long,” said Sam. “It’s almost lunchtime.”

EARLY EVENING ON MAIN STREET, a little after eight o’clock. Christmas music spilled out of the storefronts in a discordant, yet still pleasing harmony. Stig and Jody were walking past the Laughing Ninja Comic Book Shop, eating ice cream. Stig slowed down to look at the porcelain Star Wars figures in the window display. While Stig was distracted, Jody looked down at his hand. Stig had big hands. They looked strong, but Jody thought they looked gentle, too. She wondered what it would feel like to hold his hand in hers. She wondered what he would do if she did. He was not looking at her, and she carefully and slowly started to move her hand closer to his. She really did not know how this would go over.

Stig was examining a C-3P0™ statue and did not notice Jody's hand slowly reaching towards him. Jody could feel a cold trickle of ice cream running down her other hand. She dared not pull her hand back to wipe it away, not now when she was so close to Stig's thumb. She was focussing on that thumb now, oblivious to all of the other people walking up and down Main Street, laughing or shouting or the stream of ice cream that was on a collision course with her sleeve. It was a good thumb, she thought and it was almost within reach. She could almost feel the black hairs on Stig's wrist. Another few seconds and she would be there.

"Pretty cool, eh?" asked Stig, waving his ice cream cone in the direction of the window. Jody flinched, and a blob of ice cream fell off her cone and into her sleeve. Her other hand flailed around and grabbed Stig's hand.

He looked down as she quickly laced her fingers in between his. She smiled at him and licked the streak of ice cream off her other wrist. Stig smiled and squeezed her fingers gently. "Yeah, pretty cool," she replied.

Next door to the Laughing Ninja is a shop called Reggie Black's Tie Dye and Sporting Goods. Beside that is a little restaurant that changes owners and menus about every three months. That day it sold donairs, but it had previously served curries, and before that it was burritos, and then cheeseburgers, and sandwiches and briefly vegetarian a la carte. Further down the road is a small apartment building next door to an old house that sold mattresses.

Main Street continues past the gigantic parking lot that surrounds the world's largest toy store, then winds through the silver and glass buildings scattered throughout downtown. Just past the old Meat Exchange Tower, it turns and crosses the Bloephart River, named for Abner Bloephart, who built the bridge and then named the river after it.

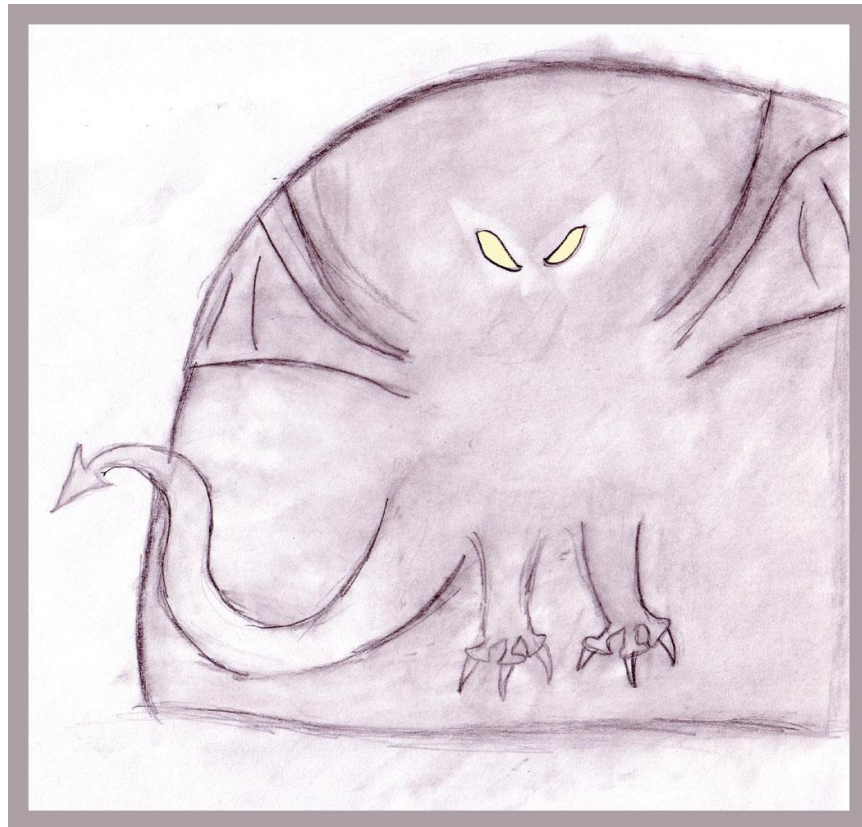
The river meanders past the Old Quarter, where all the tourists go and then past the ruins of Jody's old boarding house, which is covered by blue plastic tarpaulins. From there, it winds through a big field with an amusement park on one side. Beyond the park is the East Side, where the streets all have similar sounding names (Eastside Drive, Eastside Road, Eastside Rise, Eastside Grove, etc.) and slowly curves past row after row of new houses with big garages and big driveways. The last street in town (Eastside Lane) is where Rhonda and Les live, in a big house with scattered and broken toys in the front yard and next door to Stig's house with the big hole in the back.

Behind Stig's house, the ground slowly slopes towards a grey bluff, which rises nearly straight up from the grassy hill. There are scrubby trees sticking out from the cliff face in odd directions, and here and there dark holes lead underground.

An old face peered out of the mouth of one of these caves, staring at the city below through glowing yellow eyes. Things had changed a lot since the creature had last looked out on the little town, dozens of years before. It had slept for a long time.

Just below, it could see the hole in Stig's backyard and the white bones inside. Its large eyes lingered on the skeleton for a long time. Then it looked past Stig's house and saw the twisting suburban roads that led down to the river and the little bridge and the silver buildings. It looked past the toy store, the restaurant and the shops and then stopped and focussed on Jody holding Stig's hand and laughing.

The creature snorted and steam billowed up from one of its ancient nostrils. It pulled its long head back into the cave, scraping the stone floor with a curved black claw. Soon it would be ready to fly again, but not quite yet. It stretched its dark and leathery wings carefully. It turned its sinewy body and stalked back into the cave.



MANY PEOPLE IMAGINE THAT THE NORTH POLE is covered with quaint little snow-covered cottages where elves happily dash about, singing and laughing. Those people are mostly right. If you went there right now, right this very exact minute, you would find all manner of charming little buildings with names like Needles Tree Farm[®], Krinkles Christmas Ornament Design Studio[®] and Alfie's Toy School for Elves[®], and each one neatly arranged about the uneven snowy landscape.

Most of those people also imagine that Santa Claus himself works in a big wooden house with peaked roofs and white smoke drifting gently out of a brick chimney. Those people are completely wrong.

Santa Claus is in the business of distributing toys annually to good little girls and boys throughout the world. No operation of this magnitude could be carried out of an old Tudor mansion. Santa Claus' business requires a large staff, a sophisticated computer network and hands on management.

Because of this, Santa Claus' head office is in a 24 story steel and glass office tower located precisely on the geographic North Pole. Each floor houses different administrative departments; purchasing, accounting, systems management, elf resources, even legal.⁷ Santa Claus himself occupies a large corner office on the top floor.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam stood before the heavy oak door that led into Santa's office. It was stained deep red and had little Christmas themed carvings all over it. In the middle of the door, a large brass plaque read:

**S. Claus
Chief Executive Officer**

No matter how gently one knocked on this door, the sound reverberated like a blow on a bass drum. Iggy reached out and tapped softly under the plaque. Nonetheless, the knock rang out with a resonant *BOOM!* Iggy and the other elves cringed as the knock echoed throughout the hallway.

After several moments, the echoes dwindled away and a warm voice called out, "come in!" Yugo stepped nervously from one foot to the other, Sam gulped and Iggy opened the door.

⁷ In these litigious days, not even Santa Claus can do without lawyers. He is routinely sued by ungrateful families for leaving behind soiled carpets, reindeer droppings or an unsatisfactory quantity of toys. There is no pleasing some people.

Santa's office was the size of a small gymnasium. At the far end, Santa himself sat behind a desk that looked to be about the same size and shape as boxcar. He could barely be seen behind the stacks of papers and files that spread from one side of the desk to the other. Collectively, these uneven heaps of papers comprised the "naughty and nice list" which Santa Claus was carefully reviewing through his half moon spectacles. He set down the page he was studying and called for the elves to come join him.

The carpet was so thick and soft the elves felt like they were walking on pillows as they made the long march to the desk. There was a water cooler positioned about halfway across the office and Sam stopped there for a short break. He was starting to sweat from the long walk. This was not actually that unusual for Sam; with his girth, it was often a struggle to climb in and out of bed. Sometimes (though very rarely) even opening a refrigerator door seemed like a pointless burden to him.

Finally, the elves gathered around the big desk and settled in the three green armchairs across from Santa Claus. Santa was dressed in a red and black flannel shirt with the initials "SJC" embroidered on the breast pocket. Santa wore a lot of monogrammed shirts and Iggy had always wondered what the middle initial "J" stood for. Despite this, he had never worked up the nerve to ask.

"Good afternoon, good afternoon," said Santa. "Sit down, sit down. I'm so glad you were able to come so quickly." The three elves looked around at each other. It was not like they would go anywhere or do anything else other than immediately head to Santa's office once they had received his summons.

Santa pushed a stack of files to one side and leaned forward. "I have a problem that only you three can help me with." He looked around the piles of papers that surrounded him and lifted a small lavender coloured page from the top of one. He passed it to Iggy and invited him to read it. It was a letter, written in a loopy script on pink paper with butterflies and unicorns in the margins.

Iggy read Jody's letter quickly and passed it to Yugo, who passed it on to Sam once he had finished reading it. Sam stared closely at the letter, and traced each line with a chubby finger as he read it, his lips silently mouthing each word about Jody's dream of a monster and warning Santa Claus to stay away that Christmas. When he finally finished reading, he returned the letter to Santa Claus.

"She sounds like a complete flake to me," he said. "A real nutter." Iggy and Yugo both nodded in agreement.

Santa smiled and chuckled, “Ho ho ho.” As he laughed, he held his belly, which jiggled somewhat like a bowlful of jelly. Then he said, “at first I thought so, too. I get a lot of mail, especially as Christmas gets closer and once in a while there is a threatening letter in there from some unhappy or disturbed person. Usually I just throw those ones away or put them in the Naughty File.” He glanced at a row of black file cabinets that stood along one side of the office. He opened a yellow file folder on his desk and flipped through the top few pages. “But, I checked it out and it is just as I thought. Jody Noles has always been a pretty good girl. It just does not seem like her to threaten anybody, especially me.”

Iggy frowned. “It doesn’t seem like a threat, really. She writes about some kind of a vision.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?” asked Yugo. “She’s talking about a monster. It can’t possibly be real.”

Santa knew that things like ESP and monsters did not really have a place in Yugo’s scientific view of the world. Santa Claus also knew that the world was a little more complex and magical than Yugo would ever believe. “I really do not know whether Jody is psychic like she claims, but you see she refers to her grandmother, Lulubell. I remember her very well. Even as a young child, Lulubell Noles was the real deal, a very gifted clairvoyant. I could never surprise her with anything I left under the tree. She always knew what was coming no matter how obscure it was or how cleverly we tried to wrap it up. So, whether Jody’s dream means anything or not, in respect to her grandmother’s reputation and unquestioned abilities, I’m inclined to give her the benefit of the doubt.”

Sam grunted and shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He already had a good idea where this was going, before Iggy asked, “So how do we fit in?”

Santa leaned back in his chair. “I am not about to cancel Christmas. But I am not going to take any unnecessary chances, either. I need someone to go on ahead of me, meet with Jody and check things out. Make sure there are no monsters hiding in the woods or under the bed.”

Iggy, Yugo and Sam straightened in their seats as Santa Claus stared at them. “Well, what are you waiting for, Christmas?” asked Santa, then bellowed and explosive “Ho, ho ho!” He stood up and began walking the elves back across the office. “You’ll need to leave right away. We’ve only got a few more days till Christmas.” They reached the big oak door and Santa clapped Iggy firmly on the back so hard that the little elf stumbled.

“And hurry back!” he called after them. “We have a lot of toys to get finished this week!”



THERE WAS SOMETHING WRONG WITH STIG. He thought about Jody all the time. Here he was doing it again. It was happening so often he even had a word for it; he called it the *Jodies*.

He thought about her smile, and her perfume and her eyes that sometimes seemed blue and sometimes seemed grey. He was never sure which they were. He thought about the freckles on her nose and the way it wrinkled a bit when she laughed.

Jody was cute and clever and funny, but for Pete's sake: Jody was nuts. She thought she was psychic, but could not foresee anything. When he asked her to help him make his football picks, she got every single game wrong.

Although Jody was cute, she was almost too cute. Everything about her was almost too cute. Jody was the kind of girl who kept figurines of big-eyed rabbits and Winnie the Pooh™ all over the house and set up elaborate porcelain Christmas villages in her living room every November.

Jody did not know anything about sports or science fiction or how computers worked. She was not handy at all; she never pumped her own gas or changed her own tires. She liked reading thick books with small type about incredibly polite gentlemen and anxious ladies who expired from consumption or the vapours.

She liked eating salads with nuts on them. Her idea of a good meal was a plate full of leaves and shoots that looked like they came out of her backyard. She liked beets, not beef. She could really cook, but she made things that Stig could barely pronounce, like soufflé and flambé or even flambéed soufflé.

Jody was really good looking. Stig thought so, anyway. He wondered to himself why she was not a model. She could be on magazine covers. She was way too good looking for a chunky, unkempt guy like Stig.

She was hopelessly romantic. Jody was the kind of girl who had planned her wedding since she was six; she even had a giant wedding scrapbook under her bed, filled with clippings of handsome grooms wearing neatly tailored and perfectly pressed suits. Most of Stig's clothes had some kind of advertising on them, and he did not even own an iron.

Still, there was something about Jody that pulled Stig's mind back to her again and again. He had a bad case of the *Jodies* and he did not know if there was a cure for it. He wondered if she ever thought about him. He

wondered if she missed him when he was not around, the way he missed her now.

Stig sighed. He did not think so. Jody did not need Stig. What Jody needed was a hero.

THERE WAS SOMETHING WRONG WITH JODY. She caught herself thinking about Stig again. That was happening to her a lot.

She was thinking about how his hair was never cut quite even and never combed quite straight. And about how nice her little hand felt inside of his big hand.

Stig was sweet and kind and always held the door open for her, but for crying out loud, he was just odd. He had an entire backyard full of bones that he had named after himself. That could not be normal.

Although Stig was smart and quick, he was almost too smart. He was the kind of guy who knew the storyline of every single *Star Trek* episode (including the *Next Generation*). He knew the names of all the characters and could recite a lot of the dialogue by heart.

Stig did not know anything about classical music or poems or literature. Stig liked comic books and computer games and building elaborate plastic models of spaceships and old cars. Nor was he particularly sophisticated; Stig thought 'ballroom' was how you figured out the right size underwear to buy.

He liked his pizza cold. Stig thought a good meal was a hamburger with an extra patty and extra mustard. He liked fries, not stir-fry. Which was a good thing, she supposed, as Stig could barely cook a pot of macaroni and cheese without setting something on fire.

Stig was not really very good looking. He was handsome the way sleepy old bulldogs were handsome. Of course, he did have this dimple that creased his cheek when he smiled and Stig smiled a lot. That made her smile, too and she liked that.

He was hopeless at romance. He was the kind of guy who thought it would be beautiful to propose on the scoreboard at a hockey game. You

could not expect things like flowers or chocolates from a guy like Stig; except when he forgot an anniversary.

In spite of all that, Jody could not help thinking about him and impatiently wondering when she might see him again. She wondered what he was doing right at that moment. Was he thinking of her? Did he miss her like she missed him?

She doubted it. In fact, she was sure of it. Stig did not really need her. What Stig needed was someone to save.

THE BEAST WALKED TO THE LIP OF THE CAVE and leaned out. Smoke boiled from out of its nostrils. The man and his mate were walking down the street away from the man's lair. The place where the bones lay.

The creature stepped from the edge of cave and flexed its powerful wings. It bobbed in the air for a moment then rose up into the early evening sky. It felt good to fly again, to push its wings against the cool air. It circled above Eastside Lane and climbed higher. The city lights disappeared below as it ascended through the clouds.

It was quiet here, with only the moon and the stars to light its way. It made a wide bank turn, then slowly spiralled back down through the clouds. It took another turn above the little people houses, and then headed back to the cliffs. Its black talons reached for the opening and its wings folded back against its scaly green hide as it slipped back into the cave.

It turned and looked once more at the bones behind the man's home. Then it opened its great jaw and cried out a long shrieking roar. Smoke filled the cave opening. If anyone heard the monster, they could no longer see it as it backed slowly into its ancient home.

TGGY AND SAM STOOD OUTSIDE THE HANGAR where Yugo kept his snowmobile. The hangar was located about 800 yards south of the Santa Claus Tower⁸. It was the building where Yugo kept his snowmobile and where he spent most of his free time, tinkering with the workings and making endless new and innovative modifications.

Yugo's snowmobile is not like any other snowmobile. To call it a snowmobile really does not capture the nature of the thing; it is like calling an aircraft carrier a boat. Sure, it floats on water like every other boat, but it is a lot more than that.

Like every other snowmobile, Yugo's is designed to manoeuvre through and upon snow, but it is not so limited. At the press of a yellow button, wings extend from each side of the snowmobile and enable it to fly. By turning a blue dial, the snowmobile can float on water. And by flipping a green toggle switch, the snowmobile can even travel through time.

The hangar door rose slowly on well greased rollers and Yugo guided the snowmobile out into the cool Arctic night.⁹ It was painted a deep red and even when it was parked, it looked like it was moving. Fast. It did not even look like a snowmobile, really. It had a fully enclosed and pressurized cabin; the driver and passengers sat inside the snowmobile on comfortable leather seats. It was powered by a small lithium fusion reactor, which Yugo had designed himself. The reactor was capable of powering a small town, but more importantly, was capable of propelling the snowmobile through snow, sky or sea at phenomenal speed.

⁸ From the North Pole, where the Santa Claus Tower is located, every direction is south. So to say that the hangar is 800 yards south of Santa Claus Tower only informs the reader that the hangar is located at a point somewhere along circle nearly a mile (1600 yards *vs* 1760 yards) wide around the North Pole. The circumference of this circle, derived from the equation $c = 2\pi r$, where $r=800$ yards, is 5026.6 yards, or just a bit less than three miles (5280 yards). Given the size of this circle, this sentence does not tell the reader any more than the bare fact that the Santa Claus Tower and the hangar are 800 yards apart. It would be less confusing, and just as informative, to simply say that the hangar was located about 800 yards from the Santa Claus Tower. It is also worth remembering that if you ever go to the North Pole and use these directions to find Yugo's hangar, that you are likely to be in for a pretty long walk.

⁹ It was not actually night-time, although it looked that way. It was actually a little after 3 o'clock in the afternoon, but the sky was pitch black. The sun had set in October and would not come up until March.

The passenger door lifted open on its smooth and silent hydraulics. Warm air and softly playing Caribbean music wafted from inside. "Come on in," called Yugo from the driver's cockpit. "It's time we got going."

Sam was terrified. As far as he was concerned, the snowmobile was the single most dangerous thing on the entire planet. While riding in the snowmobile he had been chased by sharks, wolves, gangsters and other horrible creatures he had spent many sleepless nights trying to forget. It seemed to Sam, and not without some justification, that once he stepped into the snowmobile he would soon be staring death in its cold white eye. He was sure that this would be the case again. Of course, he was right.

Iggy had already belted himself into the right passenger seat and called, "hurry up, Sam, what are you waiting for?"

What Sam was waiting for was for the snowmobile to leave, but it was clear that this would not be happening until Sam was inside of it. With a heavy sigh, he lifted his significant bulk through the door and into his seat. He pulled on a safety helmet; safety goggles and fastened his safety belt. He checked the seat pocket in front of him to ensure it contained an adequate supply of motion sickness receptacles.¹⁰ Satisfied that he was as secure as humanly (or more accurately, elfly) possible, he whispered "Okay, let's get this over with."

Yugo smiled, pulled the black lever that closed the passenger door and gently coaxed the snowmobile into first gear. The snowmobile lurched forward, the thick treads on its big black rear tires chewing through the crisp white snow. Yugo gently guided the snowmobile out of Santa Claus' little North Pole community and then quickly shifted from first through fourteenth gear and engaged the rocket booster engines.

The snowmobile was screaming across the frozen Arctic plain. Their surroundings passed by like a white blur. Of course, most parts of the North Pole look like a white blur at the best of times. From inside Yugo's snowmobile, their surroundings became a *blurry* white blur.

Then came the part Sam hated the most. Well, if not the very most, it was among the top ten parts that Sam hated the most: the take off. Yugo pressed a flashing yellow button and wings slowly extended from either side of the snowmobile. Yugo ratcheted through another six gears and then eased back slowly on the steering rod. The snowmobile rose from the ground and climbed steeply into the air.

¹⁰ Barf bags.

Sam looked out the window and then started digging blindly through the seat back pocket in front of him for a motion sickness receptacle. Iggy gazed in wonder as the frosty ground disappeared below. After a few minutes, Yugo pushed the steering rod forward and the snowmobile levelled off. He pressed a few buttons on a keyboard on his control panel and turned to Iggy and Sam.

“We’ll be in New Bedlam in a coupe of hours. Would either of you care for a snack? I also have a couple of movies we could watch.”

Sam shook his head. As strange as it seemed, he did not feel like eating. Iggy accepted some cookies from Yugo, but when he opened the wrapper, he made an unpleasant face.

“Yugo, I think these cookies have gone off,” he said. “They smell funny.”

“That’s strange. They’re brand new ...” Yugo stopped in mid sentence when he smelled it too. “I don’t think that’s the cookies,” he said. He pressed a button lowering his window and glared at Sam, his unspoken accusation hanging in the air along with the other awful thing that Sam had left hanging in the air.

It was going to be a long two hours.

TWO HOURS LATER, AND OVER 3000 MILES AWAY, Stig and Jody sat together on a blanket on the field behind Stig’s house looking at the stars. Stig was pleased that things had finally reached the sitting together stage. He had been running out of ideas for things to do standing up. He pointed out different constellations in the night sky. “There’s Bigwing, the dwarf king. And that is the Great Ape that he hunted and later befriended. And that one there is the giant melon.”

Jody looked up into the sky, entranced. She wondered whether Stig was just making up the names of the constellations and the stories that went with them. She really did not care. She pointed at three bright stars grouped together. “What is that one?” she asked.

“That’s Orion,” said Stig, pleased to find a constellation he actually did know. “Some people say those three stars are what guided the three wise men to Bethlehem on the first Christmas. In fact, some people call that

constellation the ‘three wise men.’ They are still up there, following stars around the heavens.”


Jody listened and nodded. The occasional snowflake drifted down out of the frozen winter sky. It felt just like Christmas Eve, she thought. She almost expected to see Santa Claus come flying over the ridge. Her eyes dropped to the horizon and she thought she saw a falling star. She looked closer and saw it was some sort of flying object, coming closer.

She squeezed Stig on the shoulder and pointed it out to him. As it got closer, it started to look a little like a flying sled. Could it be Santa Claus? It did not seem possible. After all, Christmas was still several days away. But what else could it be? “What is it?” Jody asked.

Then Stig squeezed Jody’s shoulder and pointed a little lower. Something else was moving through the black sky. It was big and dark with leathery wings and gleaming yellow eyes. “What is that?” Stig asked.

Jody recognized the thing at once: it was the monster from her dream. The little sled, which now looked to Jody like some sort of oversized flying snowmobile, danced along the cliffs. The monster swooped up below it and opened its enormous mouth. Long white fangs bristled as the long head snapped at the flying snowmobile.

Jody screamed.

 I AM SCREAMED. YUGO SHOVED THE STEERING ROD hard to the left. The snowmobile banked away from the approaching monster and its great jaws closed on empty air.

“What is that thing?” shouted Iggy.

“I have no idea,” grunted Yugo, bobbing the snowmobile from side to side to avoid the creature. The monster was nearly a hundred feet long, its green skin covered in scales with the occasional dark gap. Broad wings extended from its shoulders and flapped furiously to keep it in the air. It had slender forearms that ended in long clawed talons. Its rear legs were thick and heavily muscled. Behind that, a long and pointed tail whipped from side to side.

Sam put his head between his legs and closed his eyes. It felt safer that way. "It's all just a dream," he muttered.

Behind them, the monster swept the air with its great wings and surged closer. Yugo pulled back on the steering rod and climbed higher. The creature followed. Then the snowmobile made a sputtering noise and the engine went quiet.

"Uh oh," said Yugo. He pressed a flashing red button. Nothing happened. The snowmobile slowly rolled over and then started to fall. "Come on," grunted Yugo. He pulled out three knobs and then slowly pushed them back in. He pressed the flashing red button again. The snowmobile kept falling. He stomped on the floor pedals. The snowmobile kept falling.

"You stupid piece of junk!" he shouted and pounded his fist on the dashboard. The engine sputtered.

Sam lifted his head and said, "you're not doing it right." Then he shouted a stream of obscenities at the snowmobile that was so wretched and so foul the windows clouded over.

The engine roared to life. Yugo pulled on the steering rod and the snowmobile hiked jerkily back up into the sky. The monster glared at them. Its yellow eyes glowed brightly. It beat the air with its wings and swiftly rose in pursuit. The snowmobile ditched and dodged, staying just out of the reach of its outstretched talons.

The monster closed in and snapped at the snowmobile again with its great jaws. Yugo swung the snowmobile around and winced as one of gnarled talon scraped along the roof. He pulled the snowmobile back to evade the thing's claws, but could not avoid the sweeping tail.

It struck the snowmobile across the front, shattering the windshield and sending tiny shards of tempered glass flying in all directions. Yugo raised his arm to protect his eyes and the creature swung its tail again, caving in the side of the snowmobile and driving it towards the cliffs. Yugo leaned as hard as he could on the steering rod and pressed both feet on his brake.

It was not enough. They slammed into the side of the cliff. The little wings sheered off as the snowmobile rolled down the escarpment. Then it hit a ledge, bounced out into the air and plummeted towards the ground. "We've had it!" Sam cried.

“Not yet,” Yugo grimaced. “I’ve installed a couple of new modifications. Hang on.” He flipped a light blue switch. Air bags popped out from the snowmobile on all sides and instantly inflated. The snowmobile, which now looked like a giant beach ball, fell to the ground in a soft rubbery cocoon. Cushioned by the air bags, it bounced high in the air before crashing to the ground again. It bounced a few more times then rolled some distance across the field before it finally stopped.

Overhead the monster circled it in the air. It screamed a terrifying guttural roar, then swept its wings together, flew up over the ridge and disappeared into the starry night.

STIG AND JODY RAN ACROSS THE FIELD as the giant ball slowly deflated. By the time they reached it, all the air had been let out, revealing an oversized and badly battered red snowmobile, which lay on its side. The door at the top slid open with a raspy wheezing sound. A small man in a rumpled red and green uniform climbed out. Then a second little man scrambled out of the snowmobile, and together he and the first man pulled out a much heavier fellow. The three of them stood unsteadily beside the snowmobile.

As Stig and Jody came closer, they saw the tallest of the little men reach back into the snowmobile, pull out a wrinkled red hat and set it on his untidy black hair. He rubbed his hands down his trouser legs in a hopeless attempt to flatten out the creases. He stepped forward and held out his hand. Stig took it. Though the hand was small, his grip was surprisingly strong.

“Hello,” he said. “My name is Iggy. And this is Yugo and Sam.” He gestured at a sturdy fellow with a thick black moustache and the third fellow who did not have a moustache, but was otherwise just thick everywhere. Yugo made a low bow while the chubby one, Sam, adjusted his tunic and nodded.

“I’m Stig,” said Stig. He took Jody’s hand and pulled her closer to him. “And this is Jody.”

Iggy’s eyes widened when he heard Jody’s name. “Jody? Jody P. Noles?” he asked. Jody nodded. Iggy reached into his pocket and pulled out a slightly crumpled sheet of paper. He unfolded it and held it up. “You’re the one we’ve come to see. We got your letter.”

Jody stared at the lavender stationary with the unicorns and butterflies. "But I sent it to Santa Claus," she said. "You're not Santa Claus. Are you?"

Iggy chuckled. "No, I'm afraid not. But we work with Santa Claus. We're elves. The elves who make the toys. Santa Claus sent us here to meet with you."

"To talk about your letter," added Yugo.

"To make sure it's safe for Santa Claus to come next week," finished Sam. He turned and looked at the wreckage of the snowmobile. "Obviously, it's not."

Iggy looked up into the sky. There was no sign of the monster. "What was that thing?" he asked.

Stig and Jody both shook their heads. "Beats me," said Stig. "I've never seen anything like that before. Then he remembered the skeleton buried in his backyard. "Well, maybe I've seen something like it before." He explained about what he had found while digging for potatoes. The elves listened carefully, but it really did not explain what had attacked them, or why.

"You know who might know," mused Jody aloud. "Grampa Les. He's lived here forever. He knows stuff about this town nobody else knows." She paused. "But you won't be able to talk to him until tomorrow. He goes to bed pretty early."

Yugo was inspecting one of the shredded wings of the snowmobile. He reached up to steady himself against one of the front skis, but it fell off in his hand. He wavered for a moment, off balance before he steadied himself. He looked down at the ski in his hand. "That's fine. It does not look like we'll be leaving here anytime soon," he said.

Iggy turned to Stig and Jody. "Is there anywhere near here we can stay until we can see this Grampa Les and repair the snowmobile?"

Jody shook her head. "I'd love to have you stay with me," she said. "But there's no way. Rhonda would have a fit. With the three boys and Grampa Les and me, there's just no room."

"It's no problem," said Stig. "You'll stay with me. I've got lots of room. And you can use my garage to fix your ... whatever it is."

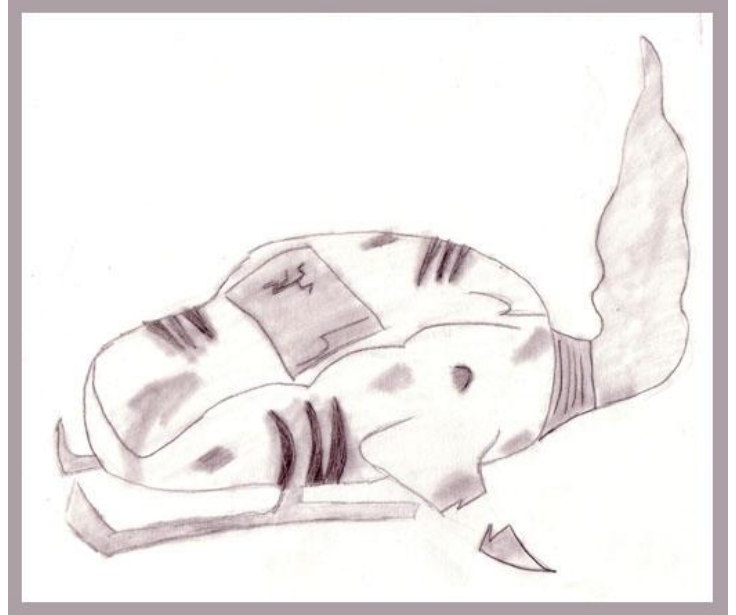
Yugo smiled slightly. He was upset about all of the damage to the snowmobile, but the only thing he liked better than driving the snowmobile was tinkering with it. Together they righted it and pushed it down the hill towards Stig's garage.

"With a little luck," said Yugo as they struggled to roll the snowmobile ahead, "I'll have the snowmobile fixed in time for Christmas."

"That's great," said Iggy.

"But it doesn't matter," said Sam. "That monster is still out there. There's no way Santa Claus can come here. He would be done for."

"Christmas is done for," agreed Iggy.



"IT WAS JUST LIKE MY DREAM," said Jody. The snowmobile was neatly parked in the garage, or as neatly parked as a big dented red snowmobile with dozens of loose and broken parts could ever be. Stig led the elves into his house. He lifted a pile of recently washed, but still unfolded, laundry off a big brown chair in his living room. A moment later, Sam settled onto it, and reclined back.

Jody looked around curiously. She had never been inside Stig's house before. It was not as tidy as she had been expecting, and she had expected it to be a mess. There were dishes in the sink and on the counter. Some looked to be clean, others much less so. Used socks were scattered here and there and used T-shirts were draped over various items of furniture.

One half of the kitchen table was covered with untidy piles of papers, the other half was home to three or four unfinished bowls of cereal. Stig felt his ears burning again. He had not been expecting company. If he had known that Jody would be coming over, he would have picked up the socks.

Jody made herself at home in the kitchen. Unable to find a kettle anywhere, she boiled water in a pot. She made tea in five mismatched mugs and brought them into the living room.

“The monster, the sled, everything was just like my dream,” continued Jody.

Iggy accepted his mug gratefully and took a sip. “Do you have a lot of these sorts of visions?” he asked.

Jody smiled, “oh yes, all the time. Last week I had a dream that it was going to snow, and it did.”

“Really?” asked Yugo. “That’s amazing. I suppose that there was no snow in the forecast?”

“Oh no,” said Jody. “The weatherman said it would snow. And then I dreamed it would snow and it did.”

Yugo looked at Iggy with a raised eyebrow. Sam took a sip of his tea, then climbed out of his chair and walked into the kitchen. He cleared some pots and an empty box of noodles to make a spot to set down his cup. He scooped three large spoonfuls of sugar into it. He stirred his tea around and then headed back to the living room.

“Then, before the last election I dreamed that Mayor Finnegin would win. And he did,” said Jody.

“Don’t tell me,” said Sam, settling back into the big brown reclining chair. “He was running ahead in the opinion polls before the election?”

“Miles ahead,” said Jody. “Everyone wanted him to win. The old Mayor he was running against was a terrible crook.”

Sam looked over at Iggy and Yugo and raised a chubby eyebrow.

“Tell them about that time you we went to the movies,” said Stig.

“Oh, that’s a good one,” said Jody. “Last summer, when that big science fiction movie came out, well everybody wanted to see it. And the night before, I had this dream that it was completely sold out and I could not get in. So, the next day, when I tried to go to see it, there was a line up all the way around the theatre. I waited for like an hour, but by the time I got to the front, it was completely sold out.”

“So, you had a dream that a really popular movie would be sold out on its opening day?” asked Iggy, a hint of doubt creeping into his voice.

"I sure did," said Jody proudly.

Iggy looked back at Yugo, his own eyebrow raised.

It was Sam who said what they were both thinking. "These are the most pointless predictions I've ever heard. Anyone could have foreseen this stuff. Have you ever once, even once, predicted something that nobody expected?"

Jody's eyes narrowed and her nose wrinkled. "What about just now?" asked Jody. "I dreamed all about you and your little sled and that monster. That was some pretty good predicting, if you ask me."

Iggy nodded. That was true. "But in your letter you said it was Santa Claus that was going to be attacked by the monster," he said.

"Well, that's what I thought," explained Jody. "In my dream I saw the flying red sled and it felt just like Christmas Eve. I figured that it had to be Santa Claus. But it was your little sled, not Santa. I wondered where the reindeer were. Anyway, that's why I wrote the letter."

Yugo rubbed his chin. "But if you had not written the letter, we never would have come," he said.

"And nothing bad would have happened to us," finished Sam. There was a line of sugary foam on his top lip. "Your dream would never have come true!"

"Yes it would have," said Iggy. "If it wasn't us, it would have been Santa."

The room grew quiet. "We are going to have to do something about that monster," said Yugo.

"How?" asked Sam.

Yugo shook his head. Even the snowmobile had been no match for the thing. Without it, they were helpless.

"We'll talk to Grampa Les in the morning," said Jody. "He'll know what to do." She set her teacup on a stack of newspapers on the end table beside her chair. "I should get going," she said.

Stig got up. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes, you need to look after your company." She headed for the door. "I'll see you in the morning," she said.

"First thing," said Stig.

They looked at each other awkwardly for a few moments, and then Stig took a tiny step forward. Jody took a tiny step towards him. Stig shuffled his other foot an inch or two closer. Jody did likewise. Stig leaned forward slightly at his waist and put his hands on Jody's shoulders. She rested her hands on his waist. They squeezed each other gently in this fashion and then Jody slipped out the door.

"She's a real prize, Stig," said Sam, sarcastically. "Don't let that one get away."

Iggy jabbed Sam in the ribs. His syrupy tea spilled onto his green velvet jacket.

"Come on guys," said Stig. "Let me show you to the spare room." Stig led the way to a little room at the top of the stairs. There was a bunk bed there, covered with stuffed animals.

"Sometimes my nephews stay over," explained Stig.

"I call top bunk!" yelled Sam and scrambled up the ladder to the top. The upper mattress sagged noticeably. Iggy and Yugo looked at the lower bunk with trepidation.

"I'll flip you for it," offered Yugo.

In the end, Iggy slept on the bottom bunk and Yugo slept on sofa in the spare room. Like Jody, they all dreamt of monsters that night.

GRAMPA LES SETTLED DOWN into his old green easy chair, the one with the straw poking out of its cushions. He turned on the television to a rerun of a wrestling program and spread some marmalade on his toast. He was rather fond of marmalade. It was sweet, yet still tasted vaguely like medicine, so he reckoned that it must be healthy. People like Grampa Les, who are entering their second century, have usually learned from the first time through to take better care of themselves.

He took a careful bite of his toast. He did not want to bend or damage any of the complicated orthodonture, which was keeping his remaining teeth in place. He heard a loud *BANG!* which came from the direction of his room. He hoped it was not the dryer again.

Grampa Les set his toast down upon his TV tray and rattled down the hall with his walker. It was slow and tedious going. Much like Grampa Les himself, the walker was old, bent and held together with a lot of little bits of wire.

He reached the end of the hall, a little short of breath. Smoke filled the air and the laundry room door lay in a broken pile on the floor.

“Buffalo wombat pickle onion grapefruit!” swore Grampa Les in that vaguely incomprehensible way that really old people curse. Then he looked into his room. His face faded from grellow to some sort of orangey purplish colour that, if Jody saw it, she might have called ‘orple’ or perhaps ‘purange’. “Gee Martha jumpin’ forty rotten blasted six bits!”

Ronnie, Donnie and Little Jack tumbled out of his room, their clothes and faces streaked with black marks, coughing and laughing. Grampa Les clattered down the hall after them, waving a bony fist and swearing, “maple vinegar trumpet corn jam mother of juniper!”

“Oh, Grampa Les, what is it now?” asked Rhonda, who rushed down the hallway to get between him and the boys.

Grampa Les had to struggle for several moments to catch his breath before he could string together a coherent sentence. “Those little devils,” he wheezed. “They done and put a bomb or sumpin’ under my cot. They’s gone an’ blowed the door right off’n my room!”

Rhonda stuck her head into the laundry room. The smoke had cleared and she saw a large black crater in the floor, surrounded by the shattered remains of Grampa Les’ cot. His chest of drawers lay on its side and his clothes were spilled everywhere in a kaleidoscope of flannel.

Rhonda turned around, crossed her arms and looked sternly at the three boys.

“Isn’t it cool, Mom?” asked Ronnie.

“We built a bomb and blew it up!” yelled Donnie.

“We learned how to do it on the Internet!” shouted Little Jack.

Rhonda’s glare dissolved and she broke into a wide grin. She reached out and gathered the three boys into her arms. “Well aren’t you just the three smartest widdle lumpy dumpies!” she exclaimed.

Ronnie, Donnie and Little Jack squirmed out of their mother's arms and charged down the hall, and around the corner, laughing and talking loudly. "Let's make another one!" yelled Ronnie.

"A bigger one!" shouted Donnie.

"And put it under Dad's bed!" hollered Little Jack.

Rhonda wiped a tear from the corner of one eye. "They grow up so fast," she whispered softly. "But when they learn how to do new things all by themselves, it just makes you so proud." Grampa Les shook his head wearily. He had run out of random curse words to say.

The doorbell rang and Rhonda bustled past Grampa Les to get it. She swung open the door and saw Stig, who was surrounded by three little men.

Rhonda looked down her long and pointed nose at Stig, who she had come to refer to as Jody's 'gentleman caller,' making her ubiquitous quotation mark signal with her fingers whenever she said it. Stig had been a good neighbour when he kept to himself, but lately she had been seeing far too much of him. She did not particularly approve of Stig. To be sure, Jody was a flake, but she could definitely do better than a boyfriend who worked in a record store. And now he had brought along some sort of a troupe of colourfully dressed dwarves. She could not for the life of her see how any good would ever come of this.

"Yes?" asked Rhonda slowly.

"Hi Rhonda," said Stig cheerily. "We've come to see Grampa Les. Is he around? Is Jody here?"

Jody was walking down the stairs wearing a blue sweat suit and large pink fuzzy slippers. When she saw Stig at the door, she jumped down the last four steps and ran to the foyer.

"Hey Stig," she said and hugged him quickly. Stig blushed. Rhonda glared disapprovingly. "Come on in," said Jody.

She led Stig and the elves through the heaps of toys and clutter that filled the living room, to where Grampa Les had settled back down with his toast. He had returned to his wrestling match and seemed dissatisfied with both the skill and savagery of the combatants.

"Hmph! Rasslers these days they don't know pits from polish. Ain't a one of 'em on that canvas what knows what 'bout throwin' a man no

more. Why, in my day, when a rassler flipped a man with yer back buster or yer neck cracker or even your basic no frillin' run o' the millin' German Suplex, that man what gots throwed stayed good an' throwed. Now they just pops their big fat selves up like it's all a big fat bunch o' make believe." He snorted again and adjusted his false teeth with his tongue.

"Grampa Les," Jody said, but he did not seem to notice her. He was absorbed in his wrestling program and was still fuming about Ronnie, Donnie, Little Jack and the ever diminishing quality of wrestlers these days.

Jody repeated his name a little louder. He kept staring at the television. He was like a lizard; he rarely blinked. Finally, she shouted, "Grampa Les!"

The old man spat out his toast along with his upper bridge and looked up at Jody. "Yeah yeah, I'm right here ya' don't gotta shout."

Jody smiled tightly and gestured at the elves. "I'd like you to meet some friends of mine, these are Iggy, Yugo and Sam." The elves each bowed politely as they were introduced.

Iggy stepped forward and said, "we were hoping you could help us. Jody says you know more than anybody about this city." He went on to explain where they had come from, and their near escape from the monster. "Do you have any idea what it was?"

Grampa Les peered down at Iggy, Yugo and Sam. A thin line of drool leaked from the edge of his mouth. It hung from his chin and bounced up and down while he talked. "Christmas elves, eh?" said Grampa Les. "Figgers. Always sumpin' screwy going on in this place."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Jody.

"Oh you all know perfectly well what I'm meanin'. This town ain't like other towns. Stuff happens here what don't happen no place else. Strange noises. Odd sightings. You go out into the woods 'round here yer as like to come 'cross a sasquidge as you are a rabbit or a bear. 'Tis a blue moon pret' near every night hereabouts."

Jody looked at Stig, who looked at Iggy, who looked at Yugo who looked at Sam, who just could not stop staring at the dollop of drool wagging from Grampa Les' chin.

"What makes this place so different?" asked Iggy.

Grampa Les forgot about the wrestling. It was not often people asked his opinion about anything. Not that this ever stopped him from giving it, but the availability of a willing audience was a rare treat. He leaned forward, his bony elbow poking out through a hole in his sweater.

“There ain’t nothin’ right ‘bout this town. There never has been. Ya see, the whole place was built on top of an ancient Injun burial ground ... ”

“So, you mean it’s haunted?” asked Yugo.

“Confound it boy, lemme finish,” barked Grampa Les. The drool snapped up and stuck to the bottom of his chin, leaving a shiny white loop swinging back and forth while he talked. “’snot like it’s haunted. Not ‘zactly. It’s sumpin’ more’n that. Ya see, like I was tryin’ to tell you all when you all was goin’ on and interruptin’ me, this town was built on an old Injun burial ground. And nothin’ good never came o’ buildin’ nothin’ on top of no old Injun burial ground. But what makes it even worse than that, is that the ancient Injun people built their burial ground on top of the sacred burial ground what the people before them left behind their own selves.”

“Who was here before them?” asked Iggy.

“Who knows? Cavemen? Leprechauns? Spacemen? I wouldn’t bet against any one of ‘em,” Grampa Les said. “But stuff happens here that don’t happen no place else. Like that rascal you all seen last night. There ain’t been no dragons ‘round here since I was a boy chasin’ critters on Ol’ Gramp Heethin’s farm.”

Grampa Les looked thoughtfully up at the ceiling. “I used to see ‘em sometimes. Dragons, I mean. Flyin’ ‘bout at night time. They never gits out and ‘bout durin’ the day time. Don’t see ‘em no more though. Wondered myself sometimes where they gots their old selves off to. But I betcha anythin’ you all gots worth bettin’ that’s what that rascal was. A good old fashioned dragon.”

“Oh please, there’s no such thing as dragons,” snorted Sam.

“So you says,” Grampa Les said, a new line of drool escaping from the other side of his lips. Sam strained to look away, but he could not. “But there ain’t no such thing as no Christmas elves, neither, and lookit youse three.”

Grampa Les made a curt nod, having proven some sort of point. “Like I said, stuff happens here what don’t happen in none of them other towns.

Sure as I'm sittin' here, and I am, that critter what you all saw last night was a dragon."

SAM LIKED LIVING AT STIG'S HOUSE. It was a little messy, but the weather was pleasant and there was not a toy-assembly line to be found within miles. He found Stig easy to get along with, mostly because he was out all of the time, either at the record store or with Jody. Stig had a nice television set, comfortable chairs and he kept his refrigerator and pantry well provisioned. Granted, most of the provisions in his pantry were oversized potatoes, but even so, Sam was content. For two days now, he had more than made himself at home in the reclining chair near the television, with a bucket of fried chicken, an enormous sandwich or other high caloric snack nearby. He did not care if he ever went back to the North Pole.

Jody had made them a nice breakfast after their visit with Grampa Les and then the elves had returned to Stig's place, where Sam made himself an even nicer and bigger breakfast. Lunch was likewise large and marvellous, and dinner even huger and more fabulous.

Yugo spent most of that first day repairing the satellite radio in the snowmobile so that Iggy could report to Santa Claus what had happened. Santa was concerned of course, but was determined that Christmas would go ahead, as planned and on schedule. If there was a dragon to be dealt with, he was sure the elves could manage it. Sam did not see how they would ever manage it. Their best and only weapon, the snowmobile, was spread out in pieces in Stig's garage.

Sam made himself another triple-decker roast beef, tuna, spaghetti and meatball sandwich and returned to the reclining chair in front of the television. He flipped through the stations, looking for a program without dragons, toy building or violence against elves. While many shows satisfied these minimal criteria, none of them really grabbed his interest. He decided to check up on Yugo, just to make sure that the snowmobile repairs were not progressing too rapidly. He gathered up his sandwich and waddled out to the garage.

The snowmobile rested on four cinder blocks. Engine parts and other mysterious bits and pieces were spread in a tidy oval around it. Yugo was underneath the snowmobile, tightening the convex thermal jammers and loosening the radial plasma shields. Sam found a stool and climbed

up onto it with his sandwich. He found watching Yugo working almost as enjoyable as watching Stig's big screen television.

Yugo had been toiling continuously for two days, and as far as Sam could tell, the snowmobile was still an immobile wreck. Of course, even if Yugo could get it to fly again, Sam was having no part of it. So long as that monster was still out there, Sam was keeping both of his chubby feet firmly on the ground. He chewed his sandwich noisily, and drops of mustard fell onto his red velvet jacket.

Iggy was in the cockpit looking up everything he could about dragons on the snowmobile's onboard computer. He had already learned quite a bit. Dragons were considered to be very rare indeed and were widely thought to be extinct. Many writers denied that dragons existed at all outside the realm of mythology, but his research confirmed that Grampa Les was right. The monster that attacked them was unquestionably a dragon. It had the traditional appearance of a dragon: a long sinewy body covered in scales, glowing yellow eyes, leathery wings and an apparent hostility to strangers.

It was difficult to separate legitimate dragon research, or 'dragonology'¹¹ from some of the downright fanciful writings about dragons. For example, one commentator argued, in all seriousness, that since dragon bones were always found underground, that this proved that dragons must live underground themselves.¹² Another contended that dragons hoarded gold because it is an excellent conductor of heat and dragons, being cold-blooded creatures, like to lay on a pile of gold to stay warm. Iggy found this to be laughable. A conductor like gold would draw heat out of the dragon's body. If anything, a dragon resting on such a treasure hoard would have to be very hot-blooded indeed to stay warm.

¹¹ Dragonology, or the study of dragons, is a branch of the broader field of science known as cryptozoology, or the study of exotic (i.e.; "made up") creatures. One of the other branches of the field of cryptozoology is 'elfology', the study of elves. The University of California at Berkeley, among others, offers a master's degree in elfology, or an M.E. While very few of these degrees have ever been bestowed, many unqualified people behave as though they have advanced degrees in ME.

¹² This is an example of the logical fallacy of confusing cause and effect. The mere fact that two things occur together does not mean that one causes the other. Politicians commit this fallacy on a daily basis. For a modern example of this fallacy, log into www.google.ca and type in the phrase "global warming". Political digression ends right now.

Although some of these theories were obviously nonsense, the sheer number of stories about dragons and depth of published dragon lore gave credence to their existence. Iggy had found reliable dragon sightings throughout the world. A giant lizard was thought to live in Loch Ness in Scotland, another had been seen in Lake Okanogan in Canada. Dragons had been sighted in Tibet,¹³ England,¹⁴ Greenland,¹⁵ and countless other nations.

It appeared that they had hollow bones, like birds, in order to enable them to fly. Some dragons could live for hundreds or even thousands of years. Dragon scales were thought to be fireproof and a dragon's blood was believed have powerful healing qualities. One legend had it that the four major rivers in China were formed by four dragons, who had been buried deep below the ground. The town of Draguignan, in France, was named for a dragon that had lived there in ancient times. There was a certain breed of dragon that was reported to migrate to the Gulf of Mexico each year to breed before returning to their homes in distant lands. And every 50 years, the townspeople of Somerset, England reenact a battle with a dragon that took place nearly 800 years ago. It was said that should the town fail to maintain the custom, the dragon that once ravaged their village would return.

Iggy was particularly intrigued by the story of St. George and the dragon. St. George was a knight who fought in the Crusades. During his journey home, he chanced to stop in a village that was being terrorized by a dragon. Each day, the dragon required that a maiden be sent to him. The unfortunate girl was chosen by lottery and then sent to her doom in the valley where the dragon lived. On the very day that St. George arrived in the village, the king's own daughter had been chosen and was already on her way to meet her grisly fate.

St George resolved to save her and raced after her on his horse. He quickly overtook her small procession and, raising his spear, entered the valley of the dragon. He found the dragon waiting by a lake for his daily sacrifice and charged at it. They fought for a long time, and finally the dragon backed St. George against a large tree. It was then that St. George wounded the dragon under one wing, where it had no scales.

¹³ *Dragons in the Tibet Sky*, The Epoch Times, August 9, 2005

¹⁴ *The Flying Serpent or Strange News Out of Essex*, May 28, 1669.

¹⁵ Hans Egede, *A Description of Greenland*, 1734

The princess was saved and St George returned to the village in triumph.¹⁶ It gave Iggy hope that a lone knight was able to overcome a dragon. Perhaps, with a little luck, three elves could do likewise.

Iggy concluded that dragons had a well-demonstrated predilection for living in caves, hoarding treasure and kidnapping beautiful maidens. They were intelligent, aggressive and almost indestructible. And while all of this was fascinating, it really had not brought him any closer to understanding what this particular dragon was after, or more important, how they would ever make the skies above New Bedlam safe before Christmas.

Iggy shut down the computer and climbed out of the cockpit. He walked over to join Sam, who had finished his sandwich and was contemplating what to eat next. Suddenly a terrible shriek shook the garage. Iggy jumped and Sam nearly fell off his stool. Yugo scrambled out from under the snowmobile.

Together, the three elves raced to the back of the house. Piles of dirt ringed the backyard and surrounded the pit where the bones of Stig's curious find still lay. Two museum workers who had been carefully sweeping one of the bones with a pair of tiny brushes had stopped their work and were staring in the direction of the cliffs.

Once more, the mournful screech rang out over the quiet neighbourhood. A chill not only ran up and down Sam's spine, it sprinted. He felt cold. Somewhere up there, far too close for his liking, the dragon was calling.

THE DRAGON SHRIEKED AGAIN. Its call was long, low and terrifying. Its yellow eyes squinted with rage and smoke spilled from its nostrils. It pulled its long, bony head back into its cave. It dared not cry out again and give away itself away, but it could not be helped.

¹⁶ The legend goes on to record that once St George slew the dragon, the entire village converted to Christianity. St George went on to become the patron saint of England, and his flag, a white standard with a red cross, remains the flag of England to this day. St George's Day is observed on April 23 each year. I bet that you never knew that.

The legend is silent about whether St George ever wore wellies.

The people were back again, walking among the bones. Touching them. The dragon could not bear to see it. A hundred years before, its mate had fallen in the field below, and died. In time, the grass and flowers grew around her and the dirt swept over her, yet still the dragon remained. For a hundred years he had watched over her, sometimes resting, but always protecting her.

He had been sleeping for a long time. Years perhaps, but he awoke the moment the shovel had touched her. He watched in horror while they dug her from where she had lain for so long. Why were the people doing this? The dragon had always left them alone. And why had the flying machine come? The dragon did not know what it was, but he saw to it that it not get anywhere near her.

The dragon knew he could not stay silent and hidden any longer. People came all the time and more of them every day, some with cameras and microphones. He could not abide it. He knew that he must act, and soon. He knew what he must do. He would protect her.

IT WAS THE SUNDAY BEFORE CHRISTMAS. Stig had the day off. Even though it was close to Christmas, the record store was closed. They had not sold a record all month and Stig thought there was a good chance they would not sell one before next Christmas. There was something to be said for the peace and quiet of the record store, but it would be nice to see a customer occasionally.

Stig was spending his day off sitting on a bench in his garage with Iggy and Sam watching Yugo busily tinkering with his snowmobile. It was slowly starting to take shape. Yugo had rebuilt the fringle capitulator and reinstalled the overhead crampler grossets. He whistled as he tightened down the enerphase hood with his screwdriver. He paused and lifted his head. A clacking rattling racket clattered up Stig's driveway. He turned and saw Grampa Les, standing in his walker in the open garage doorway. Yugo stepped back from the snowmobile and wiped the grease off his hands.

"Hey, Grampa Les," he greeted the old man. "What brings you by?"

"Had to git away from those three brats," growled Grampa Les. "All their whoopin' and hollerin' and carryin' on is gonna be the end o' me. I can't even stand to look at 'em. They gotta hold o' the cat now and Lord knows

what they gonna do to it. Prob'ly paint it pink or sumpin'. Last time they shaved that pussy bald." He chuckled hoarsely, "poor critter shivered for six months till its hair grew back." His walker creaked and popped as he shambled into the garage.

"That walker sounds terrible, Grampa Les," said Yugo.

"Don't I know it," replied Grampa Les. "I can't git 'round without it, though. Every time I give her a go on my own, I just end up flat on my tailbone. Done broke my hip half a dozen times or more." The old man gave the walker a tentative kick, then tipped dangerously to one side before righting himself.

"Let me take a look at it," offered Yugo. He led Grampa Les to the bench and gathered up the flimsy walker. Even as he held it, it made the occasional cranking, popping, rattling noise. A quick inspection revealed that all of the screws were either loose or missing, one of the wheels was bent and the hand brake line had been suspiciously cut. "HmMMMM. This might take a little while," he said.

Grampa Les settled onto the bench beside Stig. "Why ain't you out with that gal?"

"She's working today, Grampa Les," he replied. Stig envied Jody for working in a store that sold actual products to actual customers and actually got busy at Christmastime.

Grampa Les nodded and then asked, "ya kissed her yet?" He nudged Stig in the ribs with a bony elbow.

Stig flinched and then rubbed his side. That jab had really hurt. He hoped that it did not leave a bruise. Stig bruised easily. "No, not yet," he answered.

"Well, what are ya waitin' for boy? Christmas?" Grampa Les demanded. "Gal like that ain't gonna wait 'round forever to git herself some kissin'."

Stig's ears were burning. At least it took his mind off the pain in his ribs. "I'm seeing her later, Grampa Les. Maybe then." Stig doubted it, though. He did not even know if Jody wanted to be kissed. He was not sure that he had the courage to find out.

Grampa Les smiled a knowing smile. "Good for you, lad. She's one of the good ones. She's completely bats o' course, but she's got a good heart." Stig felt the burning in his ears again. That was happening a lot lately and he wished it would stop. He decided to change the subject.

“Can I get you something to drink, Grampa Les, maybe some tea?” he offered.

“If by tea, ya mean whiskey, then yessir you can get me some o’ that,” replied Grampa Les. Stig nodded and went into the house. He returned a few minutes later with a tall glass and passed it to Grampa Les. He passed similar glasses, filled with milk, to Iggy and Sam.

Grampa Les took a deep swig from his cup and grinned, showing all eleven of his remaining teeth. “Yessir, that’s some fine tea, boy. Thank you most kindly.” He turned to Iggy, “that dragon givin’ you any more trouble?” he asked.

Sam said, “it just howls every once and a while and scares the pants off of us.”

Iggy nodded his head. “I wish we knew what it wanted.”

“I been givin’ some thought to that very question,” said Grampa Les. “Tryin’ to figger out what that rascal is gittin’ himself up to. It’s both vexin’ and perplexin’. Dragons ain’t stupid, and they don’t do nothin’ without no good reason.”

He rattled the ice cubes in his glass and took another slurp. “At first I figgered he was just playin’ with you all, but I don’t think that’s it. It don’t feel right to me. Dragons ain’t zactly known for bein’ so very playful as all that.”

“So why do you think it attacked us?” asked Iggy.

“Why does anythin’ do anythin’?” answered Grampa Les. “Usually the answer’s purdy simple. I reckon there’s only three things anybody or anythin’ wants or needs. I ‘spect your dragon was after one of ‘em or ‘nother.”

“What three things?” asked Stig.

“Food?” suggested Sam.

“Yep, that’s one of ‘em,” said Grampa Les. “But I don’t reckon that’s it. Even countin’ Sam here, there ain’t enough eatin’ on you all three to innerest nothin’ so big as no dragon.”

“Money?” asked Yugo.

“Sure enough,” agreed Grampa Les. “But that can’t be it neither. You all don’t look like you’re worth more ‘an a sock full o’ dimes between you all, so I figger he weren’t after you all for that.”

“Love?” asked Iggy.

Grampa Les leaned back on the bench and nodded his grizzled chin. “Zactly. Most important thing there is out there in the whole great big fat world. Love, that is. I ‘spect that’s what your dragon is on about. Sumpin’ it loves. Or mebbe sumpin’ what loves it.”

Iggy nodded thoughtfully. Sam just turned white. “You don’t mean to say there’s another one of those things out there, do you?” he asked.

“Who can say?” answered Grampa Les. “I’m just sayin’ that if I was a bettin’ man, and I have been known in my day to make the odd wager here and thereabouts, that I wouldn’t be bettin’ the grocery money again it.” Sam turned a little whiter. One dragon was bad enough. The thought of a second one gave him the shakes.

Grampa Les took another sturdy pull from his tumbler. Iggy and Sam sipped at their milk glasses. Yugo was still busy tinkering with the walker. His hands were a blur as he made adjustments, tightening this and that. They all sat back and watched in quiet appreciation of his handiwork.

Stig looked at his watch. “Holy cow!” he exclaimed. “I told Jody I’d meet her for dinner. It’s almost 6 o’clock. I have to get going!” He jumped off the bench and ran into the house. He returned a couple of minutes later. He had changed out of his black ‘Batman Lives’ T-shirt and into his navy blue ‘Superman Rules’ T-shirt. He grabbed his wallet from the end of the bench and ran down the driveway.

Yugo waved good-bye, and then he turned the walker over and gave one of the wheels a final adjustment. He passed it back to Grampa Les. “That should be a little better,” he said.

Grampa Les took the walker in his grizzled gellow hand. It felt brand new. It was sturdy and shone in a way it never had. A row of knobs and dials lined the bar that ran across the front of the walker. “What’re all these doo-dads?” he asked.

“Oh, I just made a few little modifications,” said Yugo. He pointed to the array of attachments on the walker. “This is your hand brake. This red button here is a trouble button, in case you ever need to call for help.”

“Ya mean in case I falls down and can’t git it up?” asked Grampa Les

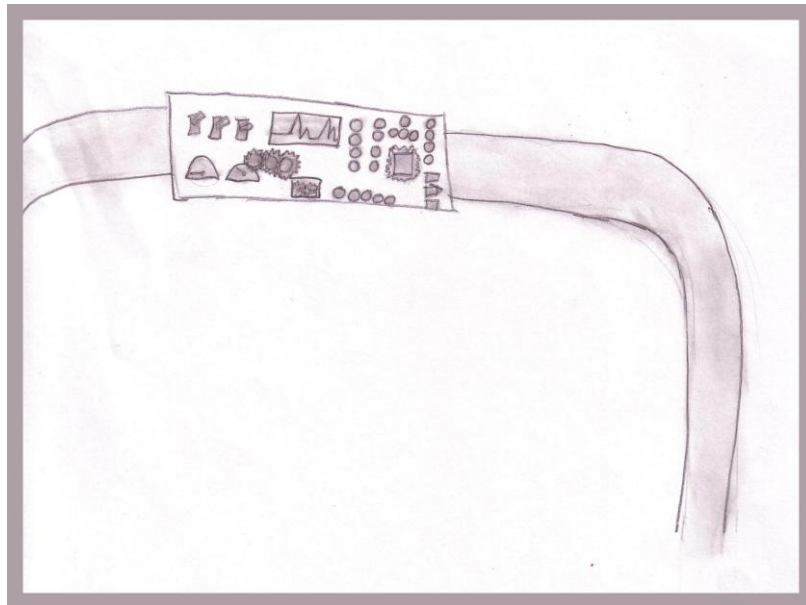
“Sure, though that’s unlikely. I installed a gyroscope here, to keep it steady. It’s pretty much impossible to tip this thing over now. Why don’t you give it a whirl? There’s a few other improvements you might like.”

Grampa Les set the walker down and stepped up to it. He took a cautious step and it rolled forward with a gentle hum, but was otherwise silent. The clatters and pops that previously foretold his arrival were gone.

“Whassat gizmo?” he asked Yugo and flipped a blue toggle switch. Big band music poured out of tiny speakers built into the handles and filled the garage. Grampa Les bobbed his head in appreciation. “Now that’s some right proper muzik,” he said.

“Nice job,” said Iggy. Yugo might have puffed his chest out, just a little.

Grampa Les pressed a yellow button. “What does this one do?” he asked.



“Careful!” cautioned Yugo. Small blue flames shot out of tiny rockets built into the bottom of each of the four legs of the walker. Grampa Les rose three feet into the air and slowly glided out of the garage.

“Rimmin’ purple Aztec Mary *and* Jim,” he cursed. He leaned slightly to the left and the walker curved gently in that direction. Iggy and Sam stared at Yugo.

He shrugged. “Rocket powered walker. I call it a ‘rocker’”

“It certainly rocks,” said Iggy.

Grampa Les and the walker scooted down the driveway. “Woo hoo!” he shouted.

JODY LOOKED AT HER WATCH. She let out a deep breath. Stig was late, again. But she knew that Stig was unlikely to see it that way. He operated on a different sort of clock that was uniquely his own. He jokingly referred to As ‘Stig Time’. Stig Time was anywhere from 30 to 60 minutes slower than ‘Jody Time’. Jody Time happened to coincide exactly with the time on her watch, the big clock at City Hall and the digital satellite time maintained at the New Bedlam Observatory. Even though he lived next door, it was as though he lived in an altogether different time zone than she did. She resolved to maintain a positive outlook. She had been looking forward to her dinner date with Stig all day and a few more minutes wait would only heighten her anticipation.

It had been a busy day at the perfume counter at Walman’s. The last Sunday before Christmas always was.¹⁷ She had sold over 85 gallons of perfume, one and two ounces at a time. She was tired. Her feet ached. Her back ached. She could not wait for Stig to arrive.

She looked at her watch again. A full thirty seconds had passed since she last checked it. She crossed her arms and tapped her foot anxiously. People passed by her on either side, some with large bags filled with colourful boxes, others anxiously looking for a place to get a large bag filled with colourful boxes in time for Christmas.

Jody never panicked over her Christmas shopping. She usually had it done by the end of July. She did wonder what she should get for Stig, though. That was one present she still had not figured out. She saw a T-shirt the day before that she thought he might like, it was navy blue and said ‘Superman Rules’ in red block letters across the front. She

¹⁷ The last Sunday before Christmas is typically the third busiest shopping day of the year, behind only the last Saturday before Christmas and December 23rd (whatever day of the week that might be). If the last Sunday before Christmas falls on December 23rd, it is usually the busiest shopping day of the year. I bet that you did not know that.

giggled involuntarily. She thought Stig was super, but he was no Superman. She doubted that he could rescue a cat caught in a tree, let alone a damsel in distress. But he made up for his lack of heroic qualities in other ways.

She felt a tap on her shoulder and turned her head. Then she heard Stig laughing from the other side. He thought it was the height of hilarity to reach across her back and tap her on the opposite shoulder. And it was kind of cute the first three times he did it. Still, she was so happy that he had finally arrived that she really did not mind. She gave him a big hug and then pinched him on the arm.

“Ow!” said Stig. “What did you do that for?”

“You’re late,” said Jody, grinning.

Stig checked his watch. It was a quarter past seven. He had said he would meet her at 6:30. He had no idea what she was talking about. In his mind, he was a little early. He rubbed his arm gingerly. She pinched pretty hard, for a girl. “That’s going to leave a mark, I just know it.”

“Poor baby,” teased Jody and put her arm around his injured one. “Where are we going?”

“I don’t care,” said Stig. “You decide.”

“I picked last time, you decide,” countered Jody.

“No, you decide,” said Stig.

“No, you.”

“You.”

“You.”

“You”

This argument continued for two blocks as they made their way down the busy street. They reached the corner and stopped in front of the House of Lard, home of the Greaseburger,TM an artery clogging slab of ground steak on a bun that contained almost a thousand calories of gravy soaked goodness. On the other side of the street was the Viet Conga, a karaoke place that served stir-fried leeks, sprouts and vegetable skins.

“Let’s go here,” said Stig, gesturing to the House of Lard.

Jody gazed longingly at the Viet Conga. She gulped. She would have to spend two hours on the treadmill after a night at the HoL. “Ok,” she said. She squeezed Stig’s arm playfully.

“Ow,” he said. “That’s right where you pinched me.”

“I know,” said Jody.

They stepped through the front door together. The HoL was one of those noisy places with genuine movie props hanging on the walls. They were shown to a small booth near the kitchen. Jody looked across the table at Stig, who stared back at her, transfixed. She looked over her shoulder and realized that he was looking at the actual chainsaw featured in a horror movie he had really liked. It even had genuine prop blood all over it. Jody turned back quickly and picked up her menu.

Stig ordered a platter of nachos and a deluxe Greaseburger™ and fries. Jody had a side order of deep fried battered celery sticks. It was the only thing she could see on the menu that looked even remotely nutritious. They each had the trademark HoL slushy drink, the Typhoon™, which arrived in matching souvenir glasses the size of beach buckets, together with slices of fruit, cherries and paper parasols. They toasted each other and each took a sip. It was pretty strong. Jody hoped that she could finish the whole thing without falling over.

Stig coloured in his placement while they waited for their main course to arrive. Someone was celebrating a birthday at the next table and was compelled to wear a garish hat shaped like a pig’s head while most of the wait staff sang ‘Happy Birthday’. Just once, Jody wanted to go to a restaurant somewhere without hearing that song. She expected that she never would.

Their dinners arrived and Stig tucked into his with relish, which is to say, he added a generous helping of relish to it before eating it up enthusiastically. Although Jody worried that Stig’s diet would eventually kill him, she did enjoy watching him eat. He just seemed to enjoy it so much.

The desert cart came by and Stig ordered a large slice of rhubarb and peach pie with ice cream and two forks. At least it has fruit in it, thought Jody as she took a bite. The bill came and Stig reached for it. Jody grabbed it first.

“Hey,” he said. “I’m buying.”

“No, I am,” countered Jody. “You paid last time.”

“So what,” said Stig. “The man is supposed to pay. Besides, I ate way more than you did.”

“It doesn’t matter, it’s my turn.”

“No, I’m paying.”

“No, me.”

“No, me.”

“Me.”

“Me.”

“Me.” This went on for a while and only ended when Jody waved down a passing waitress and pressed a credit card into her hand.

“Fine,” huffed Stig. “But I’m paying for the movie.”

“Fine,” said Jody. “What do you want to see?”

“I don’t care,” replied Stig. “You paid for dinner, you decide.”

“I picked the last movie,” said Jody. “You choose.”

“You choose,” said Stig.

“You choose.”

“No, you.”

“No, you.”

“You.”

“You.”

The waitress returned and passed the credit card slip to Jody. She signed it in her loopy hand and punctuated her name with a little heart. Stig stood up and helped her from her chair. They walked out of the restaurant hand in hand.

They headed toward the movie theatre. Stig put his arm around Jody and pulled her close. He looked deeply into her eyes. “You,” he whispered.

“You,” said Jody.

“You.”

“You.”

“You.”

“You.”

“You.”

Eventually Jody chose a movie. They went to a lacy period romance featuring green misty vistas, old manor houses and a cast of British actors that Stig did not recognize. They were all dreadfully polite. Jody cried a little toward the end, but Stig did not notice because he missed the ending entirely. He had ordered an extra large Coke, and after refilling it twice, spent most of the final act making repeated trips to the washroom.

They walked home together. It was probably not the date that Jody would have chosen on her own, but she had had a really nice time. And now it was just about over. She hated for it to end, when it felt like it had only just started.

She wondered whether Stig might kiss her good night this time. She was still waiting for him to try. She decided that if he would not make the first move, that she would. She was not going to bed again without a good night kiss.

They reached the front steps of Rhonda’s house. Somewhere inside there was a tremendous crash, followed by the sound of three boys laughing. They stopped and looked at each other for a minute, then Stig slowly leaned in towards Jody. Her heart started to beat a little faster and she could feel little butterflies in her stomach. She felt her knees shake a little. She stood on her toes and reached her face up towards his. She closed her eyes.

A shadow swept across them and Jody felt the ground shake a little. That surprised her, she did not think the Earth was supposed to move until they actually started kissing. Then the ground shook again and a loud cry shattered the air between them. Jody opened her eyes slowly and looked across Rhonda’s front lawn.

The first thing she saw were the eyes. The gleaming yellow eyes of the dragon which was standing barely ten feet in front of her. The blood

drained from her face. She tried to scream, but no sound came out. The dragon tipped its head slightly and looked for a moment like a sort of curious bird. A kind of bird that stood about thirty feet tall and weighed fifteen tons.

The dragon took a step forward and the ground shook again. The curved talons on its foreleg scraped a deep gouge in the soft grass. A great cloud of steam puffed out of the dragon's mouth with each breath it took.

Its head was long and pointed, with a bony crest that rose around the top of each of its big golden eyes. It had a long, twisting neck that swept down to a wide chest. Dark green oval scales, each the size of a large platter, covered its neck and back. They made a gentle rustling sound as the dragon moved. The scales across its belly were smaller and lighter in colour, yet still looked impenetrable. In places a scale was missing, the exposed skin raw and calloused. A ridge of bony spikes ran down its back and along the length of its tail, which ended in a long black spike. The tail waved slowly from side to side.

Each one of its hind legs was as thick as an oak tree trunk. Powerful muscles rippled as it shifted its weight from side to side. It advanced closer, the ground rumbling with each step.

Stig stepped in front of Jody. The dragon snorted steam and batted him aside with its foreleg. It was like being hit with a wrecking ball. Stig flew through the air. He landed heavily and tumbled across the lawn, his arms and legs flailing. He rose slowly on one knee and struggled to breathe.

The dragon reached out its other clawed hand and wrapped it around Jody's waist. She strained to wriggle free. He pulled her through the air and brought her closer. His grip was surprisingly gentle, but absolutely unbreakable. She screamed, but her voice was drowned out by the dragon's own cry.

Stig staggered at the dragon. He raised his fist feebly in the air. The dragon glanced at Stig, then slapped at him with his tail. Stig flipped through the air and crashed to the ground beside at the bottom of Rhonda's front steps.

Jody screamed his name. The dragon tightened his grip on her and then stretched the two wings that extended from his shoulders to the point where the skin became virtually translucent. Jody could faintly make out the glow of the street lamp behind the dragon through the membrane. The wings fluttered slightly in the breeze then the dragon pulled them together. A blast of air blew past her and they rose together

into the air. The dragon circled over the rooftops, gathering speed, then disappeared into the night.

GRAMPA LES WAS USUALLY THE FIRST ONE up, and this frosty Monday morning was no exception. He whistled tunelessly while he floated around the kitchen in the new rocker, gathering his pills and making a fresh glass of prune juice from concentrate. He turned to make sure no one was looking and dribbled an ounce of rum into it. Then he floated to the front door to get the newspaper so that he could check his lottery numbers.

He opened the door. The newspaper was not in the mailbox, but that was to be expected. The paperboy left it wherever he pleased. Sometimes it pleased him to leave it on the roof or in the shrubs. Other times it pleased him not to leave it at all. Grampa Les never knew where he might find it.

On this morning, it was left in pieces at the bottom of the steps. Grampa Les guided the rocker down the front steps. He scooped up the sports section and some other section called **LifeSTYLE** before he noticed Stig lying on the ground. There had been a light fall of snow during the night and at first Grampa Les thought the mound at the foot of the steps was an inconvenient snow drift. In fact, what originally appeared to be just another pile of snow was actually a pile of Stig. He had not moved since the dragon had knocked him to the ground several hours earlier.

Grampa Les poked the pile with the end of the rocker. Stig grunted softly. A thin cat with short pink fur slipped down the steps and licked Stig's blue lips. "Ribbon rainbow prefect gobbin' duck burger," swore Grampa Les. "Young people these days. Bunch o' flyweights what can't hold their licker. And just imagine sleepin' it off out here in the middle of winter. That boy ain't got the same sense what God gave cabbage." He poked Stig again. "Git up ya big dope, yer gonna catch yer death out here."

Stig grunted again, but did not move. Grampa Les shook his head. "I'm way too old fer none o' this nonsense," he complained. He looked down at the row of knobs and dials along the top of his rocker. "Mebbe one o' these'll do some good." He pressed a glowing green button. A horn

sounded and a stream of confetti sprayed out of the handles of the rocker.

“That ain’t it,” grumbled Grampa Les. He flipped a yellow switch. A rope net flew out of the front of the rocker and wrapped around Stig. The end of the rope net was attached to the rocker.

Grampa Les shrugged. “That’ll do,” he huffed. “Come on, lad, let’s git you on home and git some hot black coffee inna ya’. That’ll make yer feel a l’il better.” He directed the rocker towards Stig’s house, dragging Stig behind him through the snow.

STIG WOKE UP IN HIS OWN BED. His eyes fluttered as he looked around the room. Iggy, Yugo and Sam were seated in chairs around him. He was covered in blankets, yet still shivered with the cold.

“I think he’s coming around,” said Iggy.

Yugo helped Stig to sit up. His ribs and hip ached. “Careful,” said Yugo. “You’re covered in bruises. You might have some broken ribs, too.”

“That must have been some night out,” said Sam.

Stig shook his head groggily. He felt sore and cold right through. He turned to Iggy. “How did I get here?” he asked. “Where’s Jody? Is she all right?”

Iggy passed Stig a steaming mug of hot chocolate. It burned his fingers to hold it. He took a tentative sip.

“Grampa Les brought you here,” said Iggy. “He found you sleeping on the front lawn.”

“Jody’s missing, Stig,” said Yugo.

“What happened?” asked Sam. He feared the worst.

“The dragon,” whispered Stig. “The dragon has her.” Between grunts and flinches, Stig related his encounter with the dragon. Iggy, Yugo and Sam listened in terrified silence.

“I have to save her,” he said. Stig swung his feet off the bed. He grimaced in pain. It hurt to move. It hurt to breathe. Everything hurt. His finger and toenails hurt. Even his hair hurt. He slowly unbuttoned his shirt. A long tail shaped bruise curled around his chest.

“I have to save her,” Stig repeated. He looked desperately to Iggy, Yugo and Sam. “I don’t think I can do it alone. Can you help me?”

“Of course we will,” said Iggy.

“We’ll get her back,” said Yugo.

Sam did not say anything. It was exactly what he had feared. It was the worst.

Stig reached an aching toe to the floor, then carefully lifted himself out of bed. He wavered for a moment then stood up as straight as he was able. He did not feel quite so bad now that he was standing up. As long as he did not move, he was fine. He shuffled slowly out of his bedroom. Iggy, Yugo and Sam followed closely behind.

“I don’t think you should be up yet, Stig,” said Iggy.

“You’re not well,” said Yugo. “You’ve suffered a terrible beating.”

“Not to mention spending a night in the snow,” added Sam.

“I have to save her,” Stig mumbled. He made his way slowly to the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet. He dumped about half a dozen ibuprofen tablets into his hand and swallowed them dry. Then he saw a bottle of extra strength acetaminophen and took three of those as well.¹⁸

“We should call the police,” said Iggy. “Or maybe the army.”

Stig snorted. “The police are useless. And anyway, there’s no point. They’ll never believe us. They’d probably lock me up in a lunatic asylum. Then who would help Jody? Besides, this is something I have to do. Jody needs a hero. She needs to be rescued. I’m the one who has to save her.”

¹⁸ Impressionable readers are cautioned not to imitate Stig’s approach to pain management. You should never exceed the recommended dosage of pain pills or any other medication. If pain persists, you should consult a physician. And keep all medicine out of reach of young children.

Yugo nodded in resignation. "You're right. But our best weapon is the snowmobile, and it won't be ready for another couple of days."

Stig wandered into his living room in a daze. How was he going to help Jody? The dragon had already clobbered him without a thought.

The doorbell rang. Stig limped down the hall to answer it. He opened the door and Grampa Les was there, floating three or four inches off the ground in the rocker. He was dressed in a mismatched set of flannel pajamas and a tattered pair of slippers with holes in them. He was not wearing socks and an ancient, gnarled grelow toe poked out of one of the slippers. Over his pajama shirt, he wore a brown cotton vest that was covered with pockets.

"Glad to see yer finally up and about," he snapped.

"Grampa Les," Stig stammered. "What are you doing here?"

The old man steered the rocker into the front hall. "Whadder ya think I'm doin'? That gal is the only member of this fambly what's worth a rip an' I means to git her back. I can't be lettin' the likes of you'n go off an' chasin' after that dragon by yerselves," he said. "Not a one of you all knows the first thin' about chasin' after dragons."

"How did you know about the dragon?" asked Iggy.

"Listen son, yer don't git to be my age if'n yer a ninny," said Grampa Les. "When yer gots a missing gal an' a boy what's beat up black an' purple an' dragon tracks all over yer front lawn, it don't take no brain scientist to figger out what's going on."

"Why would the dragon take Jody," asked Yugo.

"Hard to say," said Grampa Les. "But it's a well known scienterrific fack that yer dragons gots theirselves a weakness fer yer young gals o' chaste character an' all."

"You mean Jody's ..." began Sam.

"I'm not sayin' nothin', I'm just sayin' we gots oursells a gal in turrible danger what needs rescuin', and their ain't nobody but us what's gonna git that job done."

"What do I have to do Grampa Les?" pleaded Stig. "I have to save her."

“Well sir, there’s a few o’ them traditional about huntin’ yer dragons you all gotta know. First thing we gotta git ya is a suit o’ armour. Can’t go chasin’ dragons in your PJ’s.” said Grampa Les, apparently oblivious to his own attire. “Ya gots a suit o’ armour boy?”

Stig staggered slightly and stared quizzically at Grampa Les. “I don’t think so,” he said.

“Well ya gotta have sumpin’. What do ya gots?” asked Grampa Les.

Stig thought for a minute and then said, “Wait, I might have something that will work.” He walked to a closet under the stairs and pulled out a heavy red duffel bag. Stig tugged open the zipper and pulled apart the sides of the bag.

A terrible odour wafted out of it. It smelled like pizza and armpits and old socks. Iggy turned away while Stig reached in and pulled out a variety of yellowed plastic and foam pads. Stig emptied the bag and turned to Grampa Les. “I play rec league hockey sometimes,” he explained. “Will this do?”

Grampa Les hovered over the malodorous hockey equipment and nodded. “It’s better ‘an a smack in the ear wit a bottle o’ beer,” he replied.

Sam watched with a raised eyebrow as Stig pulled on a garter belt, and clipped it to a pair of mismatched woollen stockings with holes in them. He stuffed a plastic shin pad into each stocking then reached for a heavily padded pair of shorts.

“Don’t forget this bit,” said Sam, pointing at a protective cup with his toe. He did not want to get too close to it.

“Thanks Sam,” said Stig. He pulled on the cup, and then climbed into the shorts. He slid his arms into a pair of ragged elbow pads then pulled on a set of plastic shoulder pads. He placed a helmet with a metal wire visor crookedly on his head. He crawled back under the stairs and pulled out his muddy Wellingtons, which he yanked onto each foot. Lastly, he wriggled his hands into a pair of thickly padded gloves, with white athletic tape wrapped around some of the fingers.

He stood before Grampa Les and the elves and said, “what do you think?”

“Nice boots,” said Sam.

“I read somewhere that they were hardy for battle,” replied Stig.

Grampa Les whirled around Stig. “Yer not ‘zactly a knight in no shinin’ armour, but I reckon you’ll do,” he said. “Now we gotta git yer a proper weapon. Swords are yer dragon huntin’ weapon o’ choice. Yer gots a sword ‘round hereabouts?”

Stig thought hard. He did not have a sword of course, but there must be something that he could use. He rooted around under the stairs and came out with an aluminum baseball bat. He swung it through the air and it made a faint whistling sound.

“I’ll need a shield, too, won’t I?” asked Stig.

“Dang rights yer’ll need a shield,” said Grampa Les. “Can’t go walkin’ into no dragon lair without no shield.”

Stig turned and shambled into the garage. He lifted a metal garbage can lid with his free hand. “How’s this?” he asked.

“It’s respeckable ‘nuff,” said Grampa Les. “There’s just one more thin’ ya be needin.” He poked around in one of the many pockets on his vest and pulled out a lacy blue brassiere. He scooted over to Stig and tied it around his arm.

“What in the world are you doing?” asked Stig, astonished.

“It’s one o’ Jody’s. She left her hanging by the dryer. Since the dryer be sittin’ in my bedroom, I figgered it was mine for the takin’,” said Grampa Les.

Stig was speechless.


“Oh don’t git yourself so fussed up,” said Grampa Les. “It’s traditial fer a dragon hunter to wear sumpin’ from his gal when he sets off fer battlin’.¹⁹ This thingamy was the only thingamy o’ Jody’s I could find.”

Stig looked down at the bra knotted around his elbow pad. He felt ridiculous.

“Now,” said Grampa Les. “Let’s git goin’.”

¹⁹ The Code of Chivalry honoured in medieval times describes this as wearing ‘the lady’s favour’. Because of this, knights always rode into battle wearing frilly scarves, lacy handkerchiefs or other perfumed garments. Being a knight was not nearly so manly a profession as might be supposed.

He led Stig out of his garage, floating a few feet ahead in his rocker. Then Grampa Les turned and glared at the elves. He barked, "what're you three standin' 'round chewin' yer gobs fer? We gots a dragon to git!"

 AND SO, GRAMPA LES LED THE LITTLE FELLOWSHIP across the snowy field behind Stig's house. In many quests of this type, the journey is long, arduous and fraught with many perils. This was not that kind of a quest. Since Stig lived so close, it took about 15 minutes to reach the base of the cliffs. They met no mysterious strangers on the way, battled no ogres or trolls and did not spend a frightening night in a dark and forbidding forest.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam had hastily assembled some makeshift armour of their own, made of plastic plates, sections of eaves trough, sofa cushions and other scraps duct taped together. They also bore their own weapons: Iggy brandished a tennis racket, Yugo a golf club and Sam carried a big steel wrench. He wore a dented soup pot on his head as a helmet. They each carried their own garbage can lid shields.

They reached a crumbling path that wound up the cliff face. It was steep and hard going, though Grampa Les was able to navigate it quickly with his modified walker. High above them the dragon was waiting in his cave; the cave where they hoped they would find Jody.

The sun was high in the sky and most of the snow that had fallen the night before had melted. The trail became muddier. Stig's Wellingtons served him well, but Iggy feared that his pointed velvet boots would never be clean again.

After an hour of steady climbing, they reached a comparatively flat stretch and stopped to rest. Stig sat on a large rock. He was perspiring heavily inside his padding and smelled a bit like a mushroom and mayonnaise sandwich that had been left in the trunk of a car for a few weeks.

"How much further?" asked Sam. He was already tired. It was hard work climbing up the cliff and he did not have a rocket-powered walker to use. He also regretted failing to bring a sandwich along for the trip.

"Could be real close now," said Grampa Les. "I used to hike 'round these parts when I were a boy. These ol' cliffs is full a caves and tunnels and

such. Lots of ‘em be big enough for a dragon to be campin’ out in. Now the first un, its just ‘round the next bend. So we gotta keep our yaps shut. Dragons, they gots theyselves yer keen sense o’ hearin’. We don’t want that sucker to know we’re comin’.” He swung the rocker around Stig and wrinkled his nose. “They also gots theyselves yer keen sense o’ smellin’ but I reckon there ain’t much we can do ‘bout that, now.”

Grampa Les guided the rocker to the middle of the path. “Now here’s the plan,” he said. “We gonna creep up to the cave real slow like. Then, when we gets to the entrance, we goes in hard. We takes no pris’ners. We show no mercy.”

“That’s it?” cried Sam incredulously. “That’s not a plan! That’s just a bunch of clichés!”

“If yer gots any better idears, lad, I’ve gots my elephant ears on to hear ‘em,” said Grampa Les, smugly.

Sam stared at the old man angrily, but did not say anything more.

Iggy clapped his hands together. “We can do this,” he said. “Just like St. George did. We can beat this dragon.”

Yugo nodded and stood up. “Just like St. George,” he said.

Sam shuddered, but he stood up, as well. He tossed the heavy wrench in the air. It flipped over once and he caught it in his other hand. “Let’s roll,” he said.

“Yessir,” agreed Grampa Les. “Less roll.”

JODY WATCHED THE DRAGON WARILY. He paced across the opening of its cave again, as if he were expecting company. She wondered if Stig was all right. She wondered if Stig was coming for her. She hoped that he would not do anything so foolish. At the same time, she hoped that he would.

Jody sat on an unexpectedly soft ledge that lined one of the cave walls. She found that the cave was surprisingly warm and comfortable. It looked like the dragon had lived there forever and took good care of his home. The floor and sides of the cavern were polished as smooth as

glass. She had tried to sleep for a while, but her worries about Stig kept her from calming her mind.

She was hungry, now. There was food in the cave, but Jody did not really share the same taste as the dragon. She knew that she would be able to leave once it got dark again. She wished she could go sooner, but she understood that the dragon dare not let her before then.

She heard shouting coming from somewhere nearby. She hoped it was Stig. There were so many things that she had to tell him. She hoped that he would get there soon.

THE LITTLE BAND CREPT AROUND THE JUNIPER BUSH that grew up beside the cave entrance. Just as they had planned, they went in hard. They took no prisoners. They showed no mercy. Stig led the charge, screaming an unintelligible war cry and swinging his bat. Iggy, Yugo and Sam were right behind him, wielding their own weapons and hollering their own battle cries.

The family of rabbits that lived in the cave fled in terror.

After a few minutes, they stopped screaming and lowered their arms. Yugo rubbed his elbow in the spot where Sam had accidentally hit him with his wrench. Aside from that, there were no casualties.

Grampa Les followed up the charge and faced the group. “That were some good work lads. Some real good work. Ain’t a dragon standin’ what coulda’ wit’stood a barrage like that ‘un. It makes me right proud to be servin’ wit you all.”

Stig did not share Grampa Les’ confidence. Sure, they had cleared the area of rabbits, but a dragon was another matter entirely. His body still ached from the previous night. The bat felt heavy in his hand.

“Let’s git movin’” said Grampa Les. “There’s anudder cave what ain’t too far off.”

They fell into line behind the old man and headed back out to the path.

IT WAS GETTING LATE. SO FAR, they had routed a colony of bats, a gaze of raccoons, a bouquet of pheasants and two terrified gophers²⁰ from their subterranean homes. The sun was sinking behind the ridge and it was getting darker. If they did not find the right cave soon, they would have to turn back.

Stig and the elves were exhausted. Their armour chafed, and their spirits were low. They had raided more than a dozen different caves and had yet to find any sign of Jody or the dragon. Grampa Les continued to lead them on, directing their plan of attack and restoring their hope after each failed engagement.

Now they stood beside another black cave door. Stig and the elves had taken up a position along the cliff wall, while Grampa Les slowly floated by them, whispering directions.

“This is the one my lads, I can just feel it in my bones,” said Grampa Les. His bones had also assured them that the last three caves they ran into were ‘the one’. “Remember why we’re here, now. We gots a gal what needs rescuin’ and a Chri’tmas what needs savin’. It’s all up to you all. Now, do you all remember the plan?”

“Yes, Grampa Les,” said Stig weakly. They went through this right before they entered every cave.

“I can’t hear you!” shouted Grampa Les.

“Yes, Grampa Les, *sir!*” hollered Stig.

“And what is it?” bellowed Grampa Les.

“We go in hard, *sir!*” shouted Iggy.

“We take no prisoners, *sir!*” yelled Yugo.

“We show no mercy, *sir!*” roared Sam.

“That’s it lads!” howled Grampa Les. “Now git in there an’ git that dragon!” Stig and the elves leapt from their positions, waving their weapons and screaming. They charged into the cave hard, taking no prisoners and showing no mercy.

²⁰ If there had been more than two gophers, they would have been called a coterie or a town. I bet that you did not know that.

And ran straight into the dragon.

The dragon was bigger up close than any of them imagined. His head rose up nearly thirty feet in the air. His scaled skin looked like gleaming iron, hard and absolutely impenetrable. His teeth and claws were like sabres. His eyes seemed to be on fire, glowing with their own golden light.

The cave was also bigger than any of them expected. The opening spread out into a wide round room with high ceilings. Every surface was smoothly polished. Several tunnels branched out from various points around the room. The back of the cavern narrowed into a smaller passage that disappeared into blackness. Off to one side, near a ledge that ringed that part of the chamber, was Jody.

She jumped to the ground as soon as Stig and the elves came around the corner. "Stig!" she screamed. "Stig, don't!"

Her words went unheard and unheeded. The battle was joined.

Stig reached the dragon first, swinging his bat in a wide arc. He struck the dragon just above the knee. It was like hitting a concrete post. The bat vibrated crazily in his hands and pain shot up both arms.

Iggy arrived next, his tennis racket raised high. He feinted left, then ducked right, giving the dragon a good whack on his belly. Had Iggy been using something more deadly than a tennis racket, he might well have injured his foe. As it was, the dragon took no notice of it, and Iggy was left holding a badly broken racket.

Yugo and Sam reached the dragon together. They jumped and swiped their weapons at the dragon's chest, but they could not reach it. They came down and Yugo sprinted to the left leg while Sam attacked the right. They each delivered hard blows, but the scales protecting the dragon were harder yet.

The dragon seemed bemused by the raid on his home and made little effort to avoid his attackers. To him it must have been like being invaded by a group of squirrels.²¹ Behind them all, Grampa Les shouted directions.

"Hit 'im high boy, high I'm tellin' ya! You boy, hit 'im low. Low! And you boy, git 'im in the middle! The middle I say!"

²¹ More correctly, a dray of squirrels.

The elves had no idea where Grampa Les wanted them to go or what he needed them to do. They charged ahead together. The dragon leered at them curiously and then swung its muscled foreleg at them, sweeping their garbage can lid shields from their hands and sending them spinning uselessly across the cave. The elves pressed on anyway, hacking ineffectively at the dragon's armoured hide. The dragon was unmarked, but all that was left of Iggy's tennis racket was a broken stump with some strings hanging from the end. Yugo's driver was bent like a boomerang.

Sam's wrench was still in good shape and he wielded it with surprising strength and skill. A sturdy blow here, a firm jab there. He stepped back, twirling the wrench like a baton before bringing it down again. Surely the dragon must be feeling something?

The dragon looked down at Sam. He flicked his other arm at the elf and sent him tumbling across the smooth cave floor. Yugo started towards him, but Sam shook him off, jumped back to his feet and charged. Once again, the dragon batted him away. Sam landed roughly and got to his feet more slowly this time. He flipped the wrench over in his hand and ran back at the dragon. Sparks flew as Sam chopped at the dragon's shin with his wrench. The dragon struck him with his other hand this time, sending Sam sliding across to the opposite side of the cave. He hit the wall hard and rolled to the ground. He did not get up.

"Badger mushroom football England mother of pearl! We gots a man down," jabbered Grampa Les. "Flank 'im lads. Flank him around his flank!" Stig, Iggy and Yugo ran to the right, while Grampa Les headed to the left side to tend to Sam.

The dragon turned and swung his clawed fist at Yugo. He struck the elf on the back and flipped him up off the floor. Yugo somersaulted through the air. He closed his eyes, not wanting to see the approaching ground, and was surprised when he came down feet first. He stuck the landing like an Olympic gymnast.

He ducked to avoid a second blow from the dragon and stabbed back with his twisted golf club. The dragon batted it from his hands. Yugo turned to retrieve it, but the dragon was too fast for him. He whipped his tail around and dropped it hard on the ground between Yugo and the driver. Yugo turned around and saw Grampa Les hovering nearby.

"Red button, Grampa Les," he shouted. "Red button!"

The old man looked down at the switches and knobs on the rocker. He spotted a glowing red button and pushed down on it with a bony finger.

Laser beams spat out of the front of the rocker. They hit the dragon in the middle of the chest, leaving a row of smoking black spots.

The dragon growled. He stretched out and grabbed Yugo as the elf reached for his lost golf club. He picked Yugo up and threw him at the floating rocker. Grampa Les pulled his finger off the button and leaned out of Yugo's path. The elf flew by him and tumbled to the ground in a green and red heap beside Sam.

"Man down! We gots anudder man down!" cried Grampa Les.

Iggy wanted to go to his friends, but he could not get past the dragon. He poked it with the useless broken racket, but that had no effect. The dragon raised one of its great rear legs to bring it down on Iggy, as if he were stepping on a bug. Iggy dove to the side, receiving only a glancing blow from the dragon's toe. He got up and kicked at it. He danced back in agony. He was sure he had broken his foot. The dragon slapped at him with his left forearm and Iggy rolled over to where Yugo and Sam already lay. He tried to stand up, but the pain in his foot was too much.

"We gots more wounded here!" hollered Grampa Les. "Medic! We needs a medic!" He backed the rocker away from the elves and called to Stig. "You git 'im boy. Hit 'im where it hurts 'im!"

Sweat poured into Stig's eyes, making it difficult to see. He paced around the dragon, looking for some kind of an opening to strike. He raised his bat and moved in. The dragon eyed him, then casually whipped his tail around. The end of it caught Stig on the top of his helmet, cracking it open. The two blue plastic halves of the helmet slid down either side of his face.

Stig dropped to his knees in a daze. The dragon dropped his head down closer and opened its mouth. The only thing that Stig could see were little cartoon birds circling around his face. He shook his head to clear his vision. The dragon's face drew nearer and he opened his mouth, revealing dozens of dagger-like teeth. Beyond the dragon though, Stig saw Jody in the corner. She was calling to him.

He remembered why he had come and leapt at the dragon with renewed ferocity. He swung the bat for Jody, for his fallen friends, for all of his bruises and aching bones. He swung the bat for Grampa Les and for the record store and for all the people in the town waiting for Santa Claus to come.

The dragon took a step back as Stig hit him again and again with the metal bat, each blow ringing like the peal of a bell as the bat struck the

shiny scales. The dragon raised a wing and Stig saw a bare spot, where a scale was missing. Finally, a weakness had revealed itself. He brought the bat down on it with all of the strength he had left. It landed with a heavy thud, raising a thick purple welt and a small trickle of blood.

The dragon screamed in pain. It swung its head from side to side. Smoke poured from its wide black nostrils. Stig dropped the bent metal bat and ran past the howling dragon to Jody. The dragon lowered its head and opened its jaws again. A ball of fire flew from its mouth and surged down the cave towards them.

Jody grabbed Stig's hand and pulled him down one of the passages that branched out of the cavern. The plume of fire blew past the opening, barely missing them. The heat was still incredible.

"Here dragon, come 'n git it!" shouted Grampa Les. He sped ahead in the rocker, stabbing the red button again and again. Green laser beams spattered at the dragon. The dragon turned and belched another ball of fire.

"Butter knuckle fish licker," swore Grampa Les. He pulled his finger from the trigger and slammed the rocker into reverse. The fireball chased him to the front of the cave, but dwindled out before it reached him.

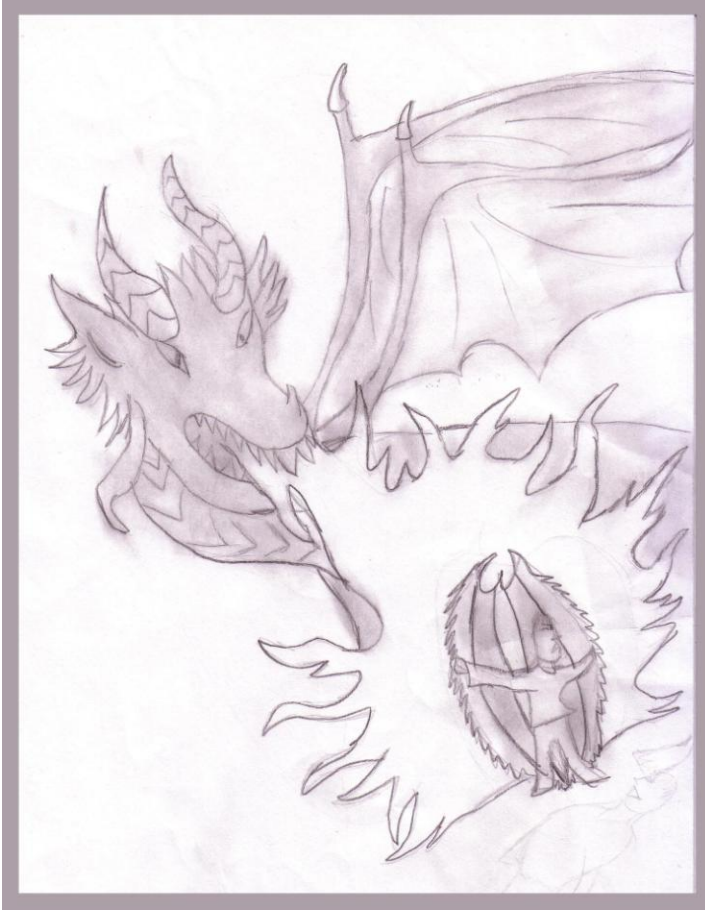
"Heh heh, ya missed me, critter!" taunted Grampa Les. He fidgeted with his controls and started forward again.

Iggy cowered on the floor beside Yugo and Sam. They were both out cold. He looked around frantically for some kind of cover as the dragon turned his attention to them and made ready to unleash yet another fireball. Iggy saw something glimmer a short distance away. He squinted at it, trying to make out what it was. It was large, green and shaped somewhat like a shield. He realised that it was one of the dragon's own scales that had been shed.

He remembered reading something about dragon scales when he was researching them. What was it? They were rare and valuable and ... and ... and then he had it.

Dragon scales were fireproof.

He scrambled to it, grabbed an end and pulled it over Yugo and Sam and himself, just as the dragon blew a roaring ball of fire at them. It was horribly hot behind the green scale, but the fire did not come through. It smashed against the wall behind them, covering it in black soot.



Iggy heard a frail voice curse, “oh bigger doodle it.” He looked over the top edge of the scale and saw that Grampa Les and the rocker had been caught by the fireball. His bushy eyebrows were burned off and his jacket was blackened and torn. Both of his slippers were missing. The rocker fizzled for a moment and then dropped onto the ground with a broken clatter. Grampa Les crumpled over top of the ruined rocker. His head fell forward and he was still.

The dragon glared strangely at them then shook its massive head. For a moment, Iggy

thought it almost looked sorry. It was obvious that none of Iggy, Yugo, Sam or Grampa Les posed any threat to it any longer.

The dragon turned and stomped down the cave after Jody and Stig.

STIG STARTED CRAWLING BACK UP the passage. Jody grabbed his arm. He winced in pain, but he did not want to tell her to let go. It was good to feel her hand on his arm again.

“Wait,” she said. “I need to talk to you.”

Stig shook his head. “I have to go back. I have to help the others.”

Jody pulled on his arm. Now it was really hurting a lot. “They’ll be okay,” she said. “The dragon won’t hurt them.”

“What are you talking about?” said Stig. He lifted her hand gently off his arm. “That dragon kidnapped you. It tried to kill us.”

“You don’t understand,” said Jody. “He only wants our help.”

“He’s got a funny way of showing it.”

Jody brushed her hair out of her eyes and said, “I guess so. But he doesn’t really get people. He doesn’t think like us.”

Stig paused at the passage entrance and turned back. “Of course he doesn’t think like us. He’s a dragon. He’s a monster.”

“He’s not a monster,” said Jody.

“So what does he want?” said Stig. He was humouring her now, and was still anxious to get back to the others.

“It’s about the bones Stig. The bones in your yard.”

Stig paused. “What about them.”

Jody turned Stig around to face her. “They belong to his mate or his wife or whatever you want to call it. She died there a long time ago and he’s been watching over her ever since. He just wants us to put her back. He wants us to bury her again. He wants us to leave her alone.”

“He wants us to do what?” Stig was taken aback at this. He was still planning to get rich off his find. He twisted out of Jody’s grip. “And you know all this, how ... ?” he asked slowly.

“The dragon told me,” answered Jody.

“Oh I see, the dragon told you,” Stig replied sarcastically. “Dragons can talk can they?”

Stig turned to leave. He immediately came face to face with the dragon, who had poked his head into the tunnel and was listening to their conversation.

“Yes Stig, dragons can talk,” said the dragon.

STIG AND JODY FOLLOWED THE DRAGON back into the big cavern. Yugo and Sam had gotten up and had gathered with Iggy around Grampa Les and the remains of his rocker.

“I must apologize for my behavior just now,” said the dragon. Its voice was rich and deep. Stig thought he detected a hint of a British accent. “It was really the most appalling manner of treating guests in one’s own home. I have such a temper. It really does get the better of me sometimes. I just lost my head for a minute there when you hit me with your little stick. I dare say that you may not appreciate your own strength. That really hurt.”

“Uh sure,” said Stig.

“Of course, it was terribly impertinent of you to come barging in here hollering and shouting and waving sticks around,” the dragon said. “Somebody could have been seriously injured.”

“Uh, sorry,” said Stig.

They crossed the cavern chamber to where Iggy, Yugo and Sam were gathered around Grampa Les. They had lain him down on the ground beside his broken rocker.

Sam turned as they approached. He was still a little dizzy, but he gamely gathered up his wrench and his dented garbage can lid. He took a bold step forward. He meant to defend his friends and would make his last stand beside his fallen comrade.

The dragon walked up to the little group and Sam charged. He swung his wrench at the dragon’s shin, which resounded with a magnificent *CLANG!* He drew his arm back to ready another blow.

“If you really don’t mind, I would appreciate it if you would stop that,” said the dragon. “It tickles.”

Sam dropped his shield onto the cave floor. He gripped the long wrench with both hands and swung it again. There was a frightful *GONG!*, but the dragon appeared to be completely unfazed.

Sweat was streaming down Sam’s face as he lowered his wrench and looked up at the dragon. “Did you just say something?” he asked weakly.

“Yes, I asked if you would be so kind as to stop battering away at my ankles like that,” answered the dragon.

“Dragons can’t talk,” said Sam. He swung the wrench again. It rang uselessly off the dragon’s iron scales.

“If you say so,” replied the dragon. “But I am afraid that I must respectfully disagree.”

Iggy got up and put his hand on Sam’s arm. “I don’t think he wants to fight with us anymore,” he said.

“Lucky for him,” sneered Sam. He waved the wrench in a threatening way.

“I’m dreadfully sorry about all of that ruckus earlier,” said the dragon. “Never really had a chance to explain with all the bashing and crashing going on there.”

Jody walked around the dragon and explained that he had only kidnapped her to tell her his story and to get her to help him. He had been watching for days and knew that Jody would be able to persuade Stig to cover up the bones in his yard.

Sam shook his head. “Do you mean to say that you have been hanging around this cave for almost a hundred years just watching over her?” he asked.

The dragon nodded his enormous head.

“And how long do you plan to keep on doing this?”

The dragon appeared to shrug his massive shoulders. “I don’t know,” he said in his mellifluous voice. “Forever, I suppose. Dragons can live for a very long time.”

Sam blinked. “That’s just nuts. Why would you do something like that?”

The dragon stared at him. A crystal tear formed at the corner of his great yellow eye. “Because I love her,” he said softly.

Sam stopped. *Love is the most important thing in the whole wide world. That is what that dragon is on about,* Grampa Les had said in his barely coherent gibberish.

“I think it’s going to be okay, now,” said Iggy.

“No, I don’t think it is going to be okay,” said Yugo. He was on his knees, cradling Grampa Les’ head in his hands. The others ran over to the old man’s side. Jody took his bony, spotted hand in hers.

Grampa Les looked up at them feebly. He was very pale. His grellow skin had faded to a greyish yellowish whitish colour, which if it had a name might be called ‘grellite.’

“I’ve had me a purdy good run kiddo, but I done reckon I’m a goner, this time,” wheezed Grampa Les.

It certainly looked that way to Stig. Grampa Les had burns all over his body. His legs were all bent and twisted. His hip was obviously broken again. His chest was sunken and made an unhappy sputtering noise with every shallow breath he took.

“It’s been a pleasure servin’ with you all,” the old man whispered, looking from Stig to the elves. “A right pleasure indeed.” He closed his eyes.

“I can’t tell you how badly I feel about this. I wish there was something that I could do. Is there anything at all that would help?” asked the dragon.

Iggy was lost in thought. There was something out there, something else he had read. He looked around the cavern at the singed scale on the floor, at Yugo’s twisted golf club, and at the broken pieces of Stig’s helmet that lay on the ground beside Stig’s bat. The bat had rolled a little ways from the spot where Stig had dropped it and had left a dark trail. It looked like blood. Stig must have really hit the dragon hard to make it bleed like that.

Then he had it: the dragon’s blood. He had read that the blood of a dragon had healing properties.

“Turn around,” Iggy said to the dragon. The great monster looked at him quizzically, and then did as he was asked. Iggy saw the spot with the missing scale. There was a big purple bruise with a gash in the middle. A little blood still oozed from the wound.

“Help me up,” he said to Stig. Stig lifted Iggy up and he reached to the welt. He tore a strip from the bottom of his jacket and rubbed it on the sore. The dragon flinched. Iggy motioned to Stig to let him down. He ran back to Grampa Les and rubbed the blood soaked cloth on his face.

The old man coughed. Then the colour seemed to slowly come back to his face. It deepened from grellite, to grellow, then the greyish hue



started to fade away and there was less yellow there. In fact, if there was a word for the colour of Grampa Les' skin now, it might be 'pink.'

He opened his eyes and blinked a few times. Then he sat up. "Well whadya know 'bout dat?" he said. He held his arms up in front of his body. They seemed a little less spindly than before and the burns were fading. Even the brown spots on the back of his hands were gone. He looked down at his feet. His crooked toes looked straighter.

He got up on one knee and then the other. Then he stood up. There were no cracking, creaking or popping noises. He did not lean or wobble and the aches in his joints were just ... gone.

Grampa Les took a tentative step forward. "Holy rubber Rudolph wood pecker," he cursed softly. He took another step and then a third.

Iggy smiled. It looked like Grampa Les was going to be all right. He passed the rag to Sam, who rubbed it on a swollen lump on his shoulder.

Jody explained that the dragon had only kidnapped her to tell her his story and to get her to help him. He had been watching for days and knew that Jody would be able to persuade Stig to cover up the bones in his yard. They agreed that they would look after burying the old bones the next morning. The dragon seemed very pleased.

Grampa Les looked down at the shattered walker. He gave it a firm kick. Then he turned to the others and hollered, "Las' one down's a rotten rutabagger!" and he ran out of the cave. Iggy, Yugo and Sam walked to the cave door and looked outside. The path down was long and steep and it had gotten dark. Grampa Les was already 50 yards away.

"We'll never catch up to him," said Iggy.

"Not a chance," said Yugo.

"I don't want to be a rotten rutabagger," pouted Sam.


"Perhaps I can be of some assistance," said the dragon. He crouched down on the cave floor and said, "climb on, there's room for everyone." The elves scrambled onto the dragon's back. Stig helped Jody up then climbed up behind her. He put his arms around her waist.

The dragon took a big step forward, flapped its wings and soared out of the cliff and into the evening air. The moon was full. Stars dotted the sky. The Three Wise Men sparkled above the cliffs.

Jody turned around and looked up at Stig. She had found her hero.

She wrapped her arms around him and reached her face up to him. They kissed for a long time while the dragon flew over New Bedlam. Finally, their lips parted, but they still held each other closely. Jody rested her head on Stig's chest.

"Stig," Jody said after a while. "Why do you have my bra tied around your arm?"

ND SO, STIG AND JODY FOUND EACH OTHER and Christmas was saved. Iggy and Sam helped Stig carefully replace all of the bones, which had been moved. Once they were satisfied that everything was as it should be, they spread dirt over them. Stig thought he might plant grass the next spring, instead of potatoes.

Dr. von Driearph was apoplectic when he heard the news. He pleaded with Stig, for the good of science, and the world itself, to let his team finish the excavation. "Those bones belong in a museum, Stig," he said.

"Those bones belong exactly where they are now," Stig answered. And although Dr. von Driearph threatened to hire lawyers and take astonishingly brutal legal action, Stig would not be swayed.

With the bones buried again, Stig, Iggy and Sam walked around the house to his front driveway. Yugo was backing the snowmobile slowly out of the garage. Loud hip-hop music blasted out of oversized speakers in the trunk. Shiny silver hubcaps on wheel each spun even after the snowmobile stopped. Yugo pressed a blue button and the snowmobile slowly rose up on hydraulic pistons. He flipped a red switch and it dropped down. He flipped the switch back and forth and the snowmobile bounced up and down on powerful shock absorbers.

"I've made a few new modifications," Yugo shouted over the drums.

"It looks great," said Iggy. "I can't wait to go for ride."

"Me neither," said Sam, chewing on a slice of pizza he had found in Stig's fridge. He actually found himself missing the North Pole. Sure, it was always cold and the work was never done, but at least you never had a dragon spitting fire at you.



“Looks like we’ll be on our way, Stig,” said Iggy. “Thanks for everything.”

“Thank you,” said Stig. They shook hands.

“So, what plans do you have for Christmas, Stig?” Sam asked, spitting crumbs as he stuffed the remains of his pizza crust into his mouth.

“I’m having Christmas dinner with Jody,” he answered. “I’m bringing potato salad.”

Iggy laughed and then he and Sam climbed into the back of the snowmobile. Something about some elf *‘gittin’ on his hose’* boomed out of the big speakers. They each waved to Stig as Yugo flipped the red switch up and down. The snowmobile bounced on its new shock absorbers again.

“Buckle up,” said Yugo. “And watch out for that first bounce, it’s a big one.” He jammed the red switch down and the snowmobile bounced straight up into the air and arced high above the quiet houses on Eastside Lane.

Stig watched the snowmobile rise into the clear blue afternoon sky until it became a tiny dot and then disappeared altogether. He frowned. Here it was, December 23rd and he still did not have a present for Jody. The shopping was going to be murder.

CHRISTMAS EVE. SANTA CLAUS SAT BACK in his chair. Iggy, Yugo and Sam were back home. They had sorted out that business with the dragon, just as he knew they would.

He looked over Jody’s letter again and then slipped it back into her file. He set the file in a basket labelled ‘NICE’.

He opened the last file on his desk. “Ronald, Donald and John Phipps. Ah yes, Lester’s boys.” Santa shook his head sadly. “Lester was a rotten one and those kids are no better.” He flipped through a few pages. “It was a close thing, but I was going to give them a pass this year. Until they put the bomb under the old man’s bed.”

He made a note on the top page and closed the file. He got up from his chair and walked across the office to the black file cabinet. He pulled

open the last drawer, which had a little card that read 'NAUGHTY' on the front. He dropped the file inside and slid the drawer shut.

He picked up his red hat from the edge of the desk and headed for the door. It was going to be another late night.

THE DRAGON LOOKED OUT FROM HIS CAVE at the lights of New Bedlam. He watched curiously as the little sled dashed from house to house through the new fallen snow.

He turned and walked to the back of the cave. It had been a busy few days. He thought he might sleep for a while, perhaps a year or two. The cave grew darker and narrower. At the back, there was a nest of sorts. In the middle of it lay a round yellow egg. It was old, its shell rough and crusted. It would hatch soon. The dragon curled around it to keep it warm, as he had for nearly a hundred years.

T H E E N D